

The Kerr Brothers *in* *New Hebrides*

BOOK 2

*Condominium, Settlers
and the Lure of France*

KATHERINE STIRLING KERR CAWSEY



The Kerr Brothers
in
New Hebrides



Photo I: The Kerr Family taken in circa 1920. All were members of Kerr Brothers' Company and, apart from Isabella Kerr, all were indicted in the case brought by the French Government in 1936. Back row: G.L.S. Kerr (1873–1960); D.H. Kerr (1878–1957). Front row: Agnes Kerr (1872–1949); Mary Kerr (1870–1959); Catherine Kerr (Mrs Johnson, 1879–unknown). Inset photos: left Flora Kerr (Mrs J. Nicol, 1876–1943); right Isabella Kerr (Mrs J. Webb, 1880–1921).

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Katherine Stirling Kerr
Cawsey

The Kerr Brothers in New Hebrides — Book 2
Condominium, Settlers and the Lure of France

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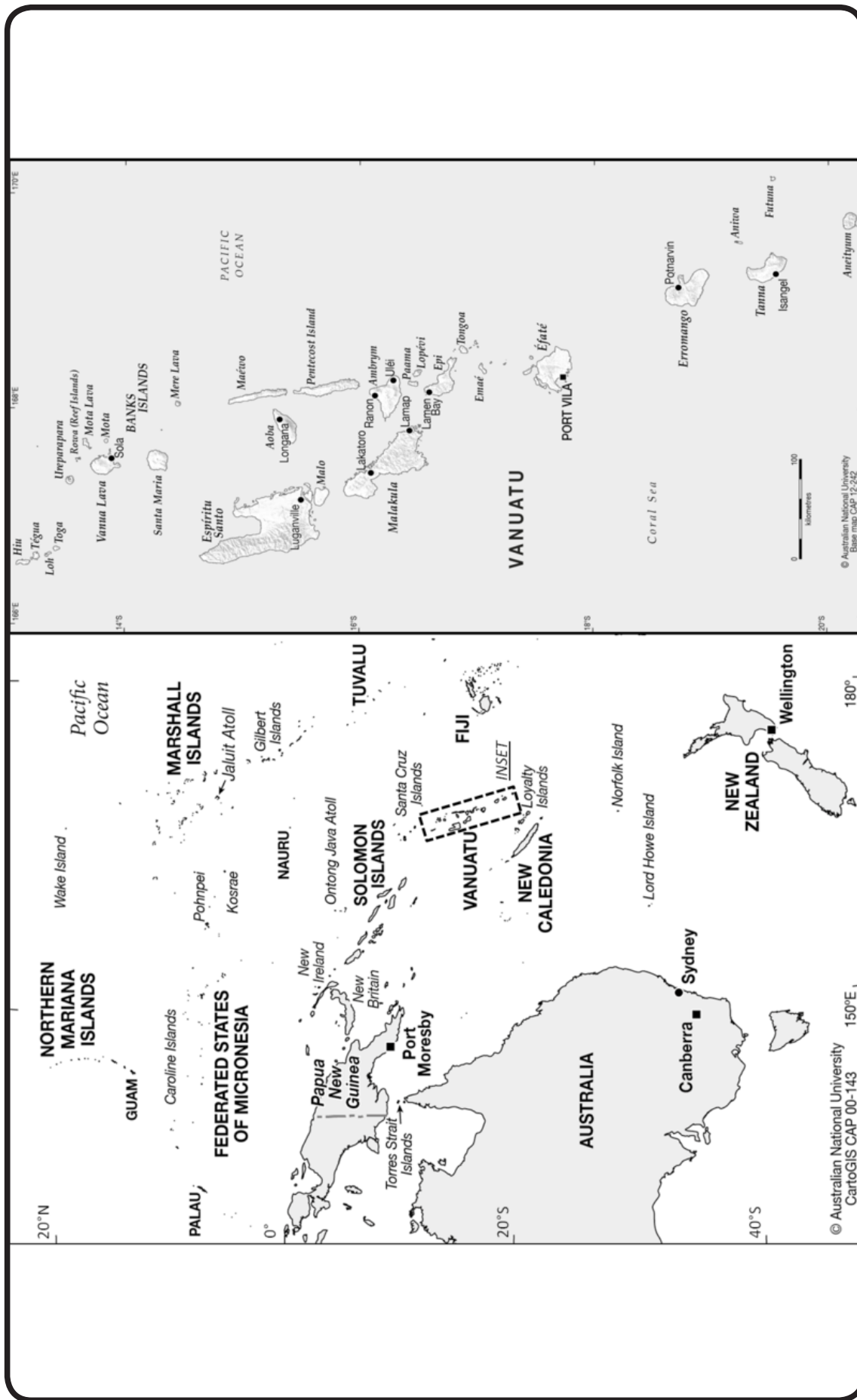
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Spine: 19th Century Rova (decorated platter), wood from Santo held by the National Gallery of Australia as a gift of Katherine Stirling Cawsey in memory of her Great-Uncle Captain Donald Macleod, Courtesy of the *National Gallery of Australia*.
Rear: Baily, Henry , Photograph of the trading ketch *Lunawanna* at the Hobart Regatta. The *Lunawanna* was a fast little ship, and won many regatta races, before being acquired in 1927 for use in the South Sea Islands trade. Photo taken c1925. Photograph courtesy the University of Tasmania Special & Rare Photograph Collection Pr.Shp. 8.
Front: The Kerr Brothers and family. Details in frontispiece.

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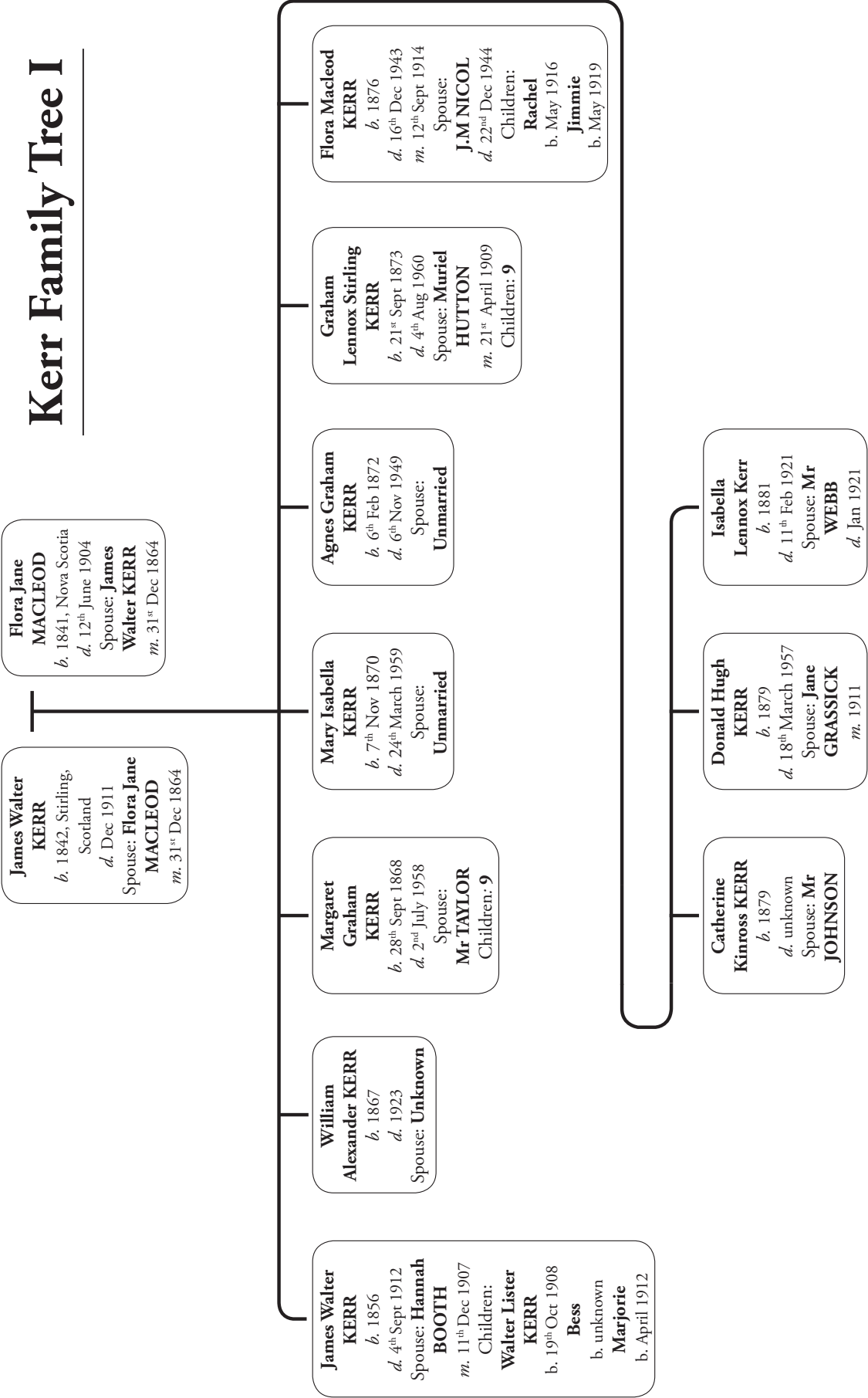
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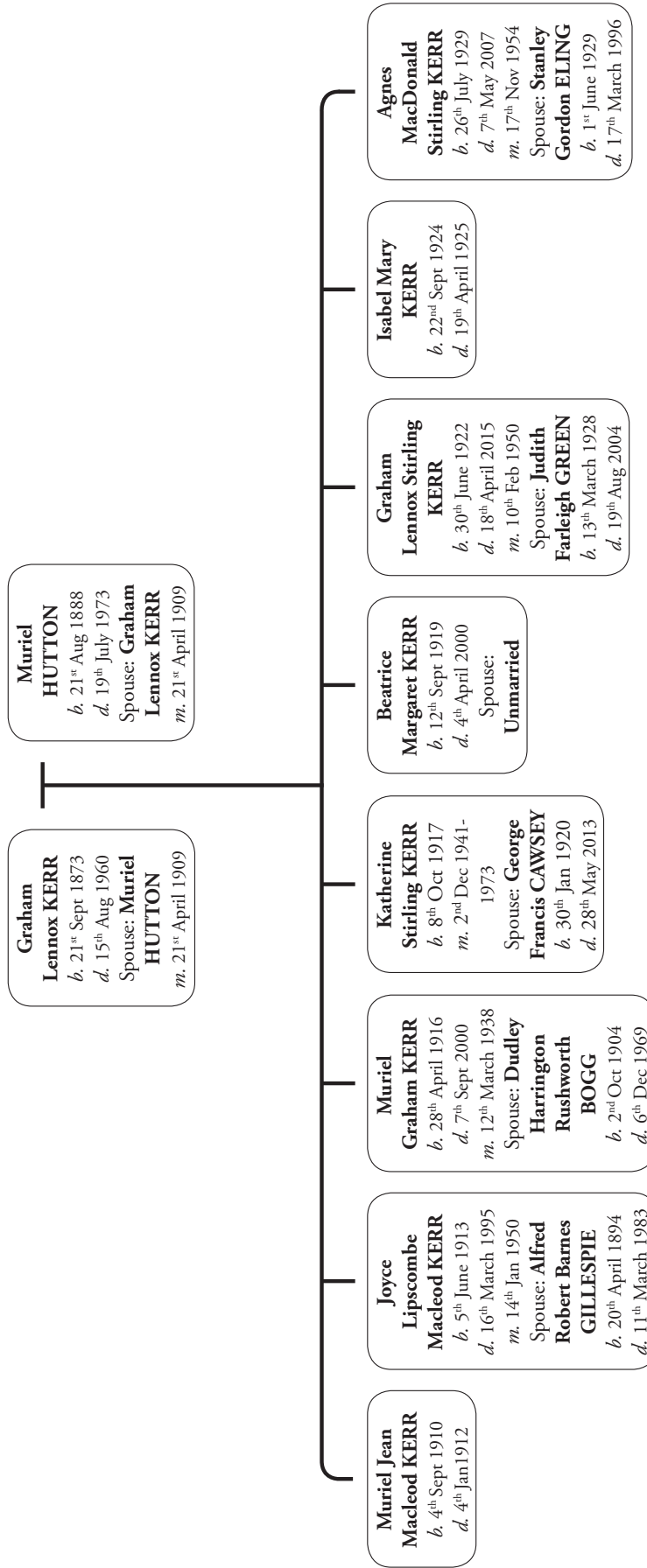


Vanuatu within the region and in detail.

Kerr Family Tree I



Kerr Family Tree II



Editor's Introduction

Katherine Stirling Kerr Cawsey spent the last thirty creative years of her life collecting information and writing about the colonial history of the New Hebrides. Her first book, published in 1998, *The Making of a Rebel*, told the story of her great uncle Captain Donald Macleod's role in the white settlement of the New Hebrides and as a trader throughout the Western Pacific region from 1868. That book ended with Macleod's death at the age of fifty in 1894. Her next book, published in 2017, was the first of a trilogy on the Kerr Brothers titled, *The Kerr Brothers in New Hebrides—Book 1: Anglo-French Experiments in Entente Cordiale* which tells the Kerr Brothers' story from 1894–1918. In that period they had transformed and enlarged Macleod's business by becoming plantation, store and ship owners trading throughout and beyond the New Hebrides.¹

The Kerr Brothers in New Hebrides—Book 2: Condominium, Settlers and the Lure of France is the second of the Kerr Brothers' trilogy and continues their story for the period 1918–1939. It is a pity Katherine did not write a separate introduction for Book 2 but possibly she thought the introduction to Book 1 would suffice for the trilogy as a whole, or maybe she just ran out of time so, as editor, I have written it instead.²

As with Book 1, Book 2 draws heavily on the diaries of her father, Graham Kerr, for content and chronological structure; but in Book 2 his point of view—largely shared by Katherine—of the political situation within the New Hebrides is quite prominent. Katherine also records her father's letters to newspapers, politicians and friends in France where he very clearly states his position on the New Hebrides political situation.

Kerr's diaries describe his periodic visits to plantation owners and others who live on New Hebridean Islands and he was very specific—indeed irrepressible—about naming the boats he travels on, and the names of the people and places he visits. Katherine uses extracts from the diaries to give many tangible instances of Kerr Brothers Company activities in the New Hebrides during the time when the firm's Sydney-based activities are consolidating. There are details of the firm buying motor vehicles or ordering boats or violins in Australia for Island customers and transporting them from Sydney; and, in Sydney, there are details of the Kerr Brothers providing hospitality to French and other New Hebridean visitors or finding them hospitals or holiday places. The diaries reveal the Kerrs and their employees travelling throughout the islands with catalogues and merchandise samples and from thence returning to Australia, or some other delivery point, usually with a return cargo of copra or cacao. There are illustrations too of life in a world of technological change and increasing entrepreneurship, of visits to factories to understand how to upgrade current technology for the Islands, or of visits to confectionary companies with new products and ideas to attempt to find a wider market for New Hebrides' produce.

The life of the Kerrs as traders with a wide range of good and hospitable connections with New Hebrideans, French, British and Indigenous people provides room for optimism about a future for the Kerr Brothers business beyond 1939 which is the year Book 2 ends.

¹ This is available through Trove on <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-536552686/view>.

² Katherine's personal motivation for writing all three books, as far as she chose to reveal it, is movingly expressed in Book 1's Introduction where she summarises the destructiveness of what happened in the New Hebrides—especially to the Kerrs. And it is a good general introduction to the trilogy. The notional title for Book 3 is *The Kerr Brothers in New Hebrides—Book 3: France and Financial Ruin for the Kerr Family 1940–1960*.

However in Book 2, as the action progresses, the focus shifts to reveal a darker side of colonial business activities and the treatment of land in the New Hebrides. Indigenous inhabitants and their connection with their lands are mostly forgotten by the intruders as French-British competition for labour to work plantations and for real estate takes prominence and this forgetfulness is seen in decision-making by the Kerrs too.

The problem for British colonists such as the Kerrs was whether to stick with the strict labour rules of the British side of the Condominium, or whether to work closely with the French side with its lax rules for plantation owners to acquire Indigenous labour and—when the Indigenous labour supply diminished—to acquire labour from countries such as Java and Indo-China.

Graham Kerr and other settlers came to believe that the French would be better at governing the New Hebrides without British involvement and in 1927 begin to sell their land to the French companies *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco/Hébridaise* where the French government itself has a huge interest.

In this second book Katherine provides fewer examples of written correspondence from and between the British and French administrations in the Condominium, Britain and France, and from the Christian Missions and the Australian Government. Officials are given less individualised lives and opinions than they had enjoyed in the first book and are no longer major characters in her history, particularly after about 1924.

Rather, the official Condominium governmental voices are replaced by those of French entrepreneurs and interconnected French government officials, some well-intentioned and some destructive, many seeking to make money from land ownership ventures in the New Hebrides and seeking either to work with or to oppose the Kerr Brothers, and Graham Kerr in particular.

If individual British official voices are for the most part silent in this book it is partly because the same British passivity, so evident in Book 1, towards the fate of the New Hebrides and its British settlers simply continues and the Kerr Brothers look elsewhere, especially to France. The detrimental consequence of British inaction is a theme that is intrinsic to Book 2. But it is also true that British inaction could be read by modern historians as less damaging to the Indigenous population and the future of New Hebrides than a more engaged British labour policy (such as that in Fiji). Passive as Britain was, it did not relinquish rule of the Condominium to the French and this, in the long run, enabled the achievement of independence in 1980 and the creation of Vanuatu.

Graham Kerr, like many others attracted to the New Hebrides, sought a significant future for the Kerr Brothers there. In his diaries and other writings, Graham Kerr shows himself to believe enthusiastically and obstinately in a particular shape that the plantation and trading future of New Hebrides could take. That he thought it needed to involve selling British settler lands to French companies with a close and sinister connection to the French Government is of concern throughout.

In 1983–84 while reading *Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and many other papers in the French *Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer*, Katherine began to be aware of a deliberately treacherous and dishonest campaign by the French *Compagnie Générale Franco/Hébridaise* to ruin her father and Kerr Brothers Company ventures. She found information Graham Kerr could not have known directly. Her discoveries would become a turning point in Katherine's understanding of and sympathy for her father and are the basis of her strong desire to set the history of the Kerr Brothers and her father straight by writing her trilogy. She speaks of her personal transition in understanding at the end of Chapter 19 which recounts how she and her sister Muriel are translating papers from the French and are beginning to unravel their problematic family history. It is at this point that they are forced to consider whether or not their father is behaving treacherously in 'selling out' to French interests.

Katherine's book is fascinating too for the oppositions it presents in the character or personal psychology of some of her protagonists. While many destructive forces were beyond Graham Kerr's control, some did get their powers from his own personal weaknesses such as his inability to reflect on the consequences of his own frenetic, exacting and obstinate nature. Failing to reflect he could not

intuit the dangers of playing French politics with only a rudimentary understanding of French society, language and character. Katherine writes:

Looking back on Graham Kerr's growing interest in France at this time and what he would do in the future, I wish that he had been able to see clearly what the French Ministry for Colonies was trying to prevent—the proper adjudication of land claims—and how it would eventually affect him. [Chapter 5 (1923)]

Often he was too cynical about the Condominium government to act objectively within it. He was also too much of a perfectionist to appreciate the individuality and work of those who managed his plantations for him. Interestingly, he found it difficult to appreciate the individuality, if arrogant, of youthful members of the Oxford Expedition to New Hebrides in 1934 especially Tom Harrison and this perhaps foreshadows his treatment of Katherine's husband described in Book 3. He also seemed unable to intuit the effect of his somewhat autocratic and self-willed nature on his wife and children and on the members of the Kerr family who constitute the Kerr Brothers Company.

Graham Kerr is up against French corruption personified in the Frenchman Leon Vibert. Vibert, when he first appears in Sydney in 1927 (Chapter 9) on the way to manage the Turtle Bay plantation on Santo on behalf of *Compagnie Générale Franco/Hébridaise*, seems charming 'like Rudolph Valentino'—Graham Kerr had sold the family's Turtle Bay plantation to the *Compagnie*. Vibert's desire to take a Citroën motor car (where there are no roads), two greyhounds, 50 pieces of galvanised iron, and other impossible accoutrements, at best, suggests a kind of Fitzcarraldo like character and initially he amuses the female members of the Kerr Brothers. It is the conditions of the sale of Turtle Bay which will have major ramifications in the lives and loss of prosperity of the Kerr Brothers over the following 30 years.

As time goes by, Vibert becomes increasingly ruinous to the plantation, its workers and its produce—letting animals loose amongst productive trees and carelessly allowing to deteriorate the beautiful Tasmanian vessel *Lunawanna* bought by Graham Kerr in 1921—and by 1932 his character shows itself as vengeful and malevolent. This is revealed in a startling manner in his own words as he describes with some pleasure his own cruel baiting and dismissal of two employees; the terminally ill Fernand Largeau and the fearful M. Rohr (see Appendix 4 and Chapter 14, 25 July 1932). Clearly Vibert is out to ruin Graham Kerr in a similarly cruel manner. Katherine has narrated the behaviour of Vibert, and the forces lined up with him, in great and careful detail. Perhaps she felt that otherwise readers would not believe her.

Vibert's is a double act with Charles Aupied—corrupt Director of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco/Hébridaise* in the corrupt world of Parisian self serving and nepotistic politics—as they move to destroy Graham Kerr and the Kerr Brothers Company. This performance is played out, as noted earlier, in the face of British indifference including to the fate of some of its nationals in a country Britain has little stake in. As Katherine shows, minimal British action by using the New Hebrides British and Joint Courts on behalf of Kerr Brothers could have made a huge difference to their fate. On the other hand Katherine shows her father rather wilfully neglecting the niceties of commonsense and diplomacy. He sometimes refuses to communicate appropriately with the cumbersome French and British bureaucracies and judiciary of the Condominium simply because he is sure he has right on his side and why bother to let them know.

In the pairing of the well-meaning and naively ambitious enthusiast, Graham Kerr, with the malevolent characters Aupied and Vibert, *Kerr Brothers Book 2* has at its heart something that is deeply tragic, and I occasionally feel that Graham Kerr plays an Othello-like character to Vibert's and Aupied's Iago.

While Katherine's primary intention is to write of New Hebridean history, there is an undercurrent that suggests she is also looking at her father's diaries to understand his feelings about his family in the midst of his more business related concerns. So for professional reasons, perhaps, she left out many of her father's references to the private or troubling aspects of his own, his wife's and his children's lives.

There is evidence however that Katherine would have included significant family references if she had found them but they just weren't there to be found. She indicates this mostly in her endnotes but occasionally comments to this effect in the text. For instance in Chapter 17 she says:

What I wrote in much of this chapter is barely echoed in my father's 1937 diary. The diary is a very full one, devoted to actions, work was never off the agenda and certain undercurrents were suggested but not spelled out. It took considerable research for me to find out the shadowy matters underlying his work life and, in the diaries, there was little mention of members of his family and how the family might have been affected by his preoccupations.

Kerr Brothers Book 1 took us to the end of 1918 and the return of Graham Kerr to Australia with his wife Muriel and their three children Joyce, Muriel and Katherine. He returned to Australia to manage the Sydney side of Kerr Brothers business with his sisters leaving his brother Hugh and Hugh's wife Jane Kerr to deal with the New Hebrides' side, particularly the Santo plantations. As with other expatriates in New Hebrides such as the Lockhart Bells he wished to educate his children in Sydney.

His wife's—Muriel Kerr's—many setbacks in the New Hebrides (including losing two babies) made it likely she would want to be close to her family in Sydney. In fact she never wished to return to New Hebrides and never went back. But Graham Kerr does not appear to have a sense of connection to Sydney or feeling for what place could be his home. Brought up on a farm in New Zealand and, from the age of 21, living between the New Hebrides, Sydney, New Caledonia and New Zealand, he may have idealised Scotland particularly the Bridge of Allan, Stirling, the birthplace of his father in 1842, as his true home. Indeed he returned with his wife Muriel to the Bridge of Allan so she could give birth to their youngest daughter, Nancy, in July 1929. They were overseas for over a year (from early 1929 to early 1930) leaving their other five children to fend for themselves at a boarding school, Osborne Ladies College, in Blackheath in the Blue Mountains near Sydney.

Muriel Kerr had quite a strong presence in Book 1 (including from her own writings) but after the early chapters of the second book, her voice and those of his older children fade from Graham Kerr's diaries. His brother and sisters have less of a human presence too. There is little mention of his oldest children by name although photographs of Graham Kerr in the period show him with them. He never refers to the lasting psychological outcomes on five Kerr children from their stay at Osborne from 1928–1930. The violence that particularly the youngest three suffered at the school was finally exposed by a terrified six year old Len Kerr but there is no mention of this in the diaries, nor by Katherine.¹

Nor is there mention of his children's performance at school where he was prepared to shift them around to suit his own beliefs—as Katherine suggests, perhaps not uncommon for families at the time. So Muriel (Gem) Kerr was not permitted to go to University as she wanted and for a while worked at Kerr Brothers instead. Margaret Kerr who was very able and intelligent was sent from Wenona to business school against her wishes. And Katherine Cawsey, who loved history, was not permitted to study Latin to get into the academic stream at North Sydney Girls High School because her father did not want any 'ladies' in his house. Nor was Katherine permitted take up a scholarship she won to the National Art School after she matriculated. It was perhaps fortunate for these histories—and for Graham Kerr himself—that she took a position at the Sydney Public Library instead and so developed her research and historical skills to vindicate her father and Kerr Brothers through her research and writing.

I believe it is a sense of rootlessness that enabled Graham Kerr to contemplate becoming French rather than Australian or British (Chapter 17). In similar vein, owning the beautiful house he bought from Billy Hughes which he named 'Kermadec' was not sufficient to ground him in Sydney and family life. So he contemplated selling it in 1935 and in 1937 and taking his family of six children to live in Noumea much against their wishes. By the end of Book 2, from September 1938, Graham and Muriel Kerr are living in Noumea with their daughter Nancy—the first of many moves back and forth between Noumea and

¹ I have added reference to this in an endnote. I have also added to some of the family's personal story in some other endnotes.

Auckland but never a permanent move back to Sydney. His wife and daughter Margaret (who later joined and supported them) were able to return to Sydney only after his death in Noumea in 1960.

Graham Kerr's inability to settle anywhere underpins the action in the second and third of the Kerr Brothers books. As for Graham Kerr's siblings, despite going along with his plans, they seem more stable and clearer than he about where they want to live. His sisters—especially after visiting and rejecting Stalinist Russia in the early 1930s—settled in Sydney although Agnes returned to the Islands to do the Kerr Brothers' accounts well into the 1940s. His brother Hugh and wife Jane too seem to prefer being in Sydney although Hugh Kerr often returned, increasingly against his will, to work at the Hog Harbour plantation—by 1934 he 'was no longer prepared to take over permanent management there'. Book 2 suggests that it is a pity that the Kerr Brothers did not sell out all their plantation and land interests in the New Hebrides, as Graham Kerr seems to have intended in 1925 when he wrote: 'We are not getting any younger and do not want to be tied down all our lives'. But fatefully they *were* 'tied down' to the New Hebrides all their lives.

In conclusion, it is possible to see Graham Kerr as being honourable in his work relationships and business connections though often too ambitious, contradictory and stubborn to understand the consequences of his actions. At the same time, although he thought of himself as a family man, it is evident that a strong component of his nature was to be somewhat impervious to his wife and children as individuals with their own ambitions and desires. In this way, *per accidens*, it was too easy for him to endanger their welfare, and that of his Kerr siblings, in adventurous business dealings in the New Hebrides and France where there were far too many risks.

I have perhaps painted too negative a picture of Graham Kerr. Katherine certainly believed he loved his family deeply in his own way. The Kerr Brothers were very good at trading in New Hebrides and had excellent connections, so working effectively in the New Hebrides was not a pipe dream. She shows how worrying about having sufficient money to support his family with a devaluing French franc underlies some of his restless desire to move them to French countries. He always had to be seen off from a wharf in Sydney to the New Hebrides by his family too and, when he was away, he immediately missed being at home as he often said in his diaries. As Katherine notes he was not a young man: he was aged between 45 and 66 for the period covered by this second book. She also notes that it is very difficult to judge people's actions at a time when Australian cultural life was so different from the period when she was writing—the 1990s and 2000s. But the action in the third book of the trilogy strongly validates attempting to interpret Graham Kerr's actions unsentimentally and that is part of the next story.

Addendum

In editing Book 2, I have selected photographs from Katherine Cawsey's personal collection and from the collections of Graham Kerr's grandchildren, many taken by Muriel Kerr who made individual photograph albums for each of her children. I have done this to illustrate the kind of domestic life the Kerr family led from 1918 to 1939 in counterpoint to the work-driven and historical aspects of the text. After Book 1 became available through the National Library of Australia's Trove collection, I was fortunate to have been contacted by Sue Ellis whose great grandparents were Axel and Esther Cronstedt, another family with deep connections to the New Hebrides, and whose great aunt Alexina Ayton ran a store for the Kerr brothers at Tongoa. Sue Ellis provided a number of valuable photographs which give life to Book 2 and illustrate how similar, in some respects, colonialist families' lives were.

Anne Cawsey
Canberra, April 2019

Acknowledgements

Much of the text in the introductory sections of *The Kerr Brothers in New Hebrides—Book 1: Anglo-French Experiments in Entente Cordiale* remain relevant for this book and won't be repeated here. The Acknowledgements, Biographical Note, Foreword, and Editors Notes for Book 1 are available digitally through Trove on <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-536552686/view> and Katherine Cawsey's archive is also available at the National Library of Australia.

There are some additional acknowledgements I would like to make for materials, help and encouragement for this book.

I would like to thank Lindsay, John and Jamie Benaud for photographs especially of Muriel Bogg (née Kerr), Liane Shearer for photographs of the baby Nancy Eling (née Kerr), and Lisa and Gary Kerr for the many photographs of Len Kerr. Lisa and Gary also provided a wealth of photographs of the whole family from about 1920 to 1960 including a number of individual photographs of Margaret Kerr who worked for the South Pacific Commission in Noumea and supported Muriel and Graham Kerr in the last years of their lives. I enjoyed the encouragement that came with corresponding with my cousins throughout the editing of this book.

I am very grateful to Sue Ellis for providing a number of valuable photographs for Book 2 and her encouragement to continue editing these histories. Sue Ellis had met and stayed with Katherine when she was working on her books 20 years ago.

Graham Kerr took such care with naming boats and he was attached to a good number of them so I have endeavoured to include photographs where I could find them of some he referred to in his diaries. Mark Hosking and his team at the Maritime Museum of Tasmania found and digitised a number of these and I found Mark Hosking very kind and helpful. Roland Klinger enabled me to use his intriguing website—New Hebrides: Postal History & Stamps (<https://www.roland-klinger.de/NH/>)—as a source for digitised pictures of boats, people and stamped envelopes and I thank him for his generosity.

I have also used the Google search engine and Wikipedia extensively to check details such as the names and dates of administrators in the New Hebrides Condominium and much else and the 'Names List' at Appendix 6 includes such information.

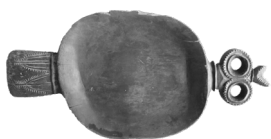
My brother and sister, Richard and Margaret, and my children Tamar and Anthony have continued to encourage me to complete editing. Katherine Cawsey likes to talk about the photographs and helps me recognise quite a few of the people portrayed. This has been very helpful but she has largely forgotten the magnificent work she did to create the books. I am pleased to be editing while she is still alive, at this time now aged 101 years. I hope I can edit the third of the books while she remains nearby.

As with the first book I would like to acknowledge the help of my friend Kathryn Collins who continues to encourage me to finalise my mother's works. She has assisted with the technical management of the draft, with helping to shape out the Introduction and with editing Book 2 for consistency. I am also grateful to Rich Pascal for his many insightful comments on an early draft of the Introduction. I am responsible for any limitations in the editing of Book 2.

In the Editor's Notes in Book 1, I wrote about the limits I set on our work. The publisher, David Vernon of *Stringybark Publishing*, is likewise aware of the compromises and limits I have

set on this publication too and I am very grateful for his willingness to publish the books under these conditions. I would also like to thank him for his encouragement of the project. We were not intending to produce any hard copies of Book 2 but in the event have done so for our family and for libraries and institutions in Vanuatu and for other institutions with strong connections to the Western Pacific and its history.

Anne Cawsey
Canberra April 2019



Illustrations

- Map 1 Location of Vanuatu and New Caledonia in the Pacific
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Photo 21 Tongoa about 1922
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Photo 47 The Chevrolet with Graham Kerr and family c. 1932–33
Photo 48 The Kerr children at Kermadec 1933
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Photo 50 Frouin's House in New Hebrides (from 1924)
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Photo 59 Nancy (aged 6) and Katherine Kerr (aged 17) on the front verandah at Kermadec circa 1935
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Photo 82 Len Kerr leaving the family house in Noumea to return to Sydney on 7 March 1939
Photo 83 Graham, Nancy and Len Kerr before Len's return to Sydney on 7 March 1939
Photo 84 Katherine Kerr holding her nephew David Bogg around May 1939
Photo 85 Four generations: Lucy Hutton, Muriel Kerr, Muriel Bogg and baby David Bogg

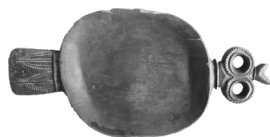
Abbreviations

In the main text of the book abbreviations are mostly not used though some use is unavoidable. In the endnotes abbreviations are used.

Abbreviation	Name
Archive Box	National Library of Australia MS Acc13.052—Papers of Katherine Stirling Cawsey: Donald Macleod & Kerr Brothers in Hew Hebrides. These will be cited in the endnotes as Archive Box with the relevant box number.
Banks Company	Oceanic Rubber Planting and Trading Co. Ltd
BIC	<i>Banque de L'Indo-Chine</i>
B. P. And Co.	Burns Philp and Company
BP and Co.	
Burns Philp	
CAMNH	<i>Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides</i>
CCNH	<i>Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides</i>
CCIB	<i>Compagnie Coloniale des Iles Banks</i>
CCV	<i>Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté</i>
CEH	<i>Compagnie des Etablissements Hagen</i>
CFINH	<i>Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides</i>
CFNH	<i>Compagnie Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides</i>
CFNH	<i>Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides</i>
CGFH	<i>Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise</i>
CNEP	<i>Comptoir National d'Escompte</i>
D.A.	District Agent
ESP	East Santo Plantations
G.A.	Government Agent, these were French and British Government Agents appointed from 1912
Me.	Maître, Master, French legal honorific
M.M.	<i>Messageries Maritimes</i>
NHBA	New Hebrides British Association
NHM	New Hebrides Mission
PMB or P.M.B.	Pacific Manuscripts Bureau
RNAS	Royal Navy Australia Station
SCNH	<i>Société Coopérative des Nouvelles-Hébridais</i>
S.D. Box	Safe deposit box
SFNH	<i>Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides</i>

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SKM or SK/M	<i>Société Kerr/My</i>
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
WPHC	Western Pacific High Commission
WPH Cmr.	Western Pacific High Commissioner



Chapter 1 1919: The Great War Ends and the Flu Epidemic Arrives



Photo 2: Our first Australian holiday Christmas 1918 to 1 January 1919 at Long Reef between Dee Why and Collaroy Beach: Tom Poleman; Joyce, Graham Kerr, Katherine (me), my sister Muriel and Clare my mother's youngest sister. Photo taken by my mother Muriel Kerr.

Graham Kerr brought his family from the New Hebrides to live in Sydney in August 1918. The family began its second year of residence in Sydney by returning on New Year's Day from their first Australian Christmas holiday—spent camping near Long Reef, Dee Why—to their home, 'Mountain View' in Lane Cove.

Graham Kerr brought his family from the New Hebrides to live in Sydney in August 1918. The family spent its first Australian Christmas holiday in Sydney camping near Long Reef, Dee Why, returning home to 'Mountain View' in Lane Cove on New Year's Day.

It was still the holiday season and on 9 January 1919 there was a picnic in the Botanical Gardens with all the Kerr Brothers' office staff joining the Graham's and Muriel's family for lunch. Late in the afternoon my father drove my sister Muriel and me home in the sulky via Drummoyne—an hour's trip and how I wish I could remember it. My mother and Joyce returned via the ferry to McMahons Point and then the tram to Lane Cove. Nobody expected to get anywhere in a hurry in those days.¹

This was the first of many picnics in the Gardens and they remain a vivid memory including the rows of statues that lined some of the paths in the Gardens and the two 'lions rampant' that guarded the entrance to a small zoo that has long since vanished. My mother often did the unthinkable and removed our shoes and socks so we could run about more freely.

In mid-January Graham Kerr collected the insurance for the *Rosabel* which had been totally wrecked on Lakona Banks, Santa Maria in the Banks Group the previous November and commenced the hunt for a replacement. *Rosabel* had not only been used for recruiting and returning time-expired labour but as a floating store and a way of replenishing Kerr Bros stores at Tongoa, Mai and Turtle Bay, as well as collecting copra from Indigenous clients. *Tamarina* however was still on the job and would be issued with a licence to recruit 100 labourers by Merton King on 17 September 1919.²

1919 was the year that the Spanish Flu—pneumonic influenza—really took hold in Sydney. It was brought from Europe by soldiers returning from the First World War. Already ships had to go into quarantine at North Head Quarantine Station, just inside the Heads, before passengers were allowed ashore.

D.H. Kerr and his wife Jane had arrived from Turtle Bay on board *Pacifique* for a well-earned holiday on 25 January but were not permitted to go ashore before undergoing the required two days in quarantine.³ The Kerr brothers and sisters were now all in Sydney; Mary and Agnes running the office, with a Miss Leveque to look after French translation—necessary because of a partly French clientele. Later in the year she would be replaced by Miss Olga Austin, whose family lived in Noumea. Bella Kerr, my father's youngest sister, soon departed for Brisbane—not employed in Kerr Bros' concerns at this time.

With the flu epidemic worsening, my father was worried because my mother was three months pregnant, so on 7 March, she and Joyce left for the Manning River for a little holiday at Taree. 'Mr Hutton sent the car to take [them] to Hornsby Station' where my father saw them off.⁴ Miss Devlin looked after Muriel and me at her place in Naremburn.

While Tom Polman, the Islander from New Hebrides who did not want to be left behind when the family came to live in Sydney, took charge at Lane Cove, my father took the opportunity to visit Newcastle and further north—Nelson's Bay. 'The place is pretty and there is a good harbour but it has not advanced ... Apparently Newcastle has kept it back.'

The Secretary of State, British Colonial Office, had been in touch with Merton King about Annie Petersen's Vysuck Estate while Graham Kerr was in Sydney. It concerned the sum of money the Kerrs, who were acting for their ward Annie Petersen, would be prepared to refund for the return to them of part of the estate not used by the Condominium Government. Graham Kerr had received bids for



Photo 3: Katherine at 'Mountain View' in Burns Bay Road about 1919–20. In the photograph album she made for her daughter Katherine, Muriel Kerr calls this 'Kermadec' but it differs from the home Kermadec that they owned and finally lived in from mid-1920.



Photo 4: At Sydney Botanical Gardens Katherine (4 years) and Margaret Kerr (2 years) c. 1921.

the land, including one from Fernand Largeau. Situated as it was in a prime part of Vila, not used by the British government and not properly paid for, this was one of the ongoing matters that needed his attention in Vila.

Emile My leased Kerr Brother House and ran the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles-Hébridais* (SCNH) in Kerr Brother's old store in Rue Higginson. He also looked after the still unused part of the Vysuck Estate where grazing rights were permitted.

It was time for Graham Kerr to put in an appearance. But ominously from his diary:

6 April: the 'flu' plague is very bad in Sydney now. Between 100 and 200 cases daily and many deaths.

Hugh and Jane Kerr and Captain P.G. Ashton were planning to leave on *Pacifique* from Neutral Bay on 8 April.⁵ However there 'have been suspicions ... of illness on board so that she has to go into quarantine before departure. We left ... soon after 3 pm and anchored at the quarantine anchorage North Head. More flu cases taken ashore today—Arabs and Japanese'. And it was the same the next day.

By 11 April: '*Passengers and ship's company put ashore in Quarantine Barracks, except for 8 of the ship's people to look after the ship. Pacifique's company (Messageries Maritimes) doing the providoring...ashore*'. More flu cases were reported the next day and by the 13 April the second captain, Rabineau, was ill.

Hugh, Jane and Captain Ashton were among the passengers not affected and they were allowed to stay ashore with relatives. It was a very worrying time for my mother with three little girls and another child expected and her husband not allowed ashore.

On 14 April he too was ordered to hospital—as usual putting on a bold front.

Thought I was just getting a cold in the chest and asked the doctor to send me some medicine. He took my temperature and sent me to hospital. In a ward with 12 others.

He spent a bad night but got good attention. He was not allowed up until 21 April, which he remarked was his and my mother's tenth wedding anniversary. He too must have been worried about how his family were faring in the epidemic, especially my mother. I imagine we stayed at home. I was only 18 months old and cannot remember. Those who went out had to wear gauze masks covering their noses and mouths.

Many years later in the 1990s my sister Muriel and I visited the Quarantine Station, curious after reading my father's diary. It still had a foreboding atmosphere. We saw the stark hospital quarters where he received such good attention from Matron Brett and Nurse Tier, but judging from the cries of despair we saw scratched on rocks near the water front, Lascars and suchlike people did not fare nearly so well.

By 22 April *Pacifique* was released from quarantine and towed up to Neutral Bay. Hugh and Jane Kerr, P.G. Ashton and all passengers who had not caught the flu were now allowed back on board.

My father was released from quarantine on 24 April and landed at Woolloomooloo. First port of call was the office and then home where he found 'all well'. My mother's elder sister, Beatrice, had been staying with her during this worrying time. Hugh and Jane stayed with Agnes and Mary, who lived at Cammeray. My father never made a fuss about his health but, from talking with family members, his life for a time had hung in the balance.

By 30 April he was permitted to leave on *Pacifique*. Passengers and mail had to be embarked from Fort Macquarie as *Pacifique* was anchored in midstream. Once again they left for Watson's Bay where the Doctor came on board 'and found some of the natives, recently out of hospital with temperatures. Ordered back to the Quarantine Station' where the natives were off-loaded.

Pacifique was then allowed to leave under quarantine for Noumea:

More crew and firemen came from Noumea by *St Antoine* as there are several in hospital and about 5 died.

Graham Kerr just missed meeting up with Martin and Osa Johnson who arrived in Sydney from San Francisco on 29 April, hoping to sail in *Pacifique* for a second trip to New Hebrides.⁶ They had

to remain in Sydney for a month which they spent checking their filming equipment and learning as much as possible about the island group and its inhabitants.⁷ Martin Johnson painted a graphic picture of *Pacifique* when she finally appeared:

She came limping into the harbor ... she had been delayed by engine trouble and by quarantines; for the influenza is raging through the South Seas. It was announced that she would sail in five days, but the sailing date was postponed several times, and it was the 18th of June before we finally lifted anchor. It seemed good to get out of the flu-infested city.

They had made their 1917 trip to New Hebrides on the same ship. This time most of the officers were different, all the rest were in hospital in Sydney and some of them were dead, including First Officer Rabineau.

Burns Philp's *Makambo* was also in Sydney at this time and doing compulsory quarantine before being able to depart. Sydney was indeed a city under siege.

To continue with Graham Kerr's diary:

Pacifique reached the Light-house [at Noumea] soon after midnight on 6 May and anchored outside the reef. [Next day] up anchor and ... to the Quarantine anchorage round north of Ile Nou. Doctor came on board and took all [our] temperatures. Some of those who had the flu in Sydney are not very well ... and we have to do some quarantine here.

They were released on 9 May and 'steamed round Ile Nou to Noumea wharf'.

Pacifique reached Vila on 14 May where P.G. Ashton was taken to hospital with fever. Fortunately he soon recovered. On 17 May *Makambo* arrived and had to go into quarantine as she had no Bill of Health for Norfolk Island, her last port of call.

Both *Messageries Maritimes* and Burns Philp chafed under these strict regulations that played havoc with their schedules but they paid off because the Spanish flu which caused millions of deaths, mostly in Europe, did not invade the New Hebrides or New Caledonia.⁸

Graham Kerr stayed in Vila to deal with business there while D.H. Kerr returned to Turtle Bay. Mme. Klehm, whose plantation at Mélé the Kerrs had leased after her husband's death in 1915, while she stayed in residence, was finding it too much for herself. He arranged for Georges Rolland to take it over, selling him the cattle which he also had agisted there, paying off labour and sending a punt to Mélé to collect the copra to be shipped from Vila on *Makambo*. I think he was also tying off many loose ends from the previous year when he and his family had lived in Vila.

He also looked after his sister Flora—married to J.M. Nicol, Condominium District Agent on Tanna: 'Koné in from Tanna—Flora up to go into hospital re a little Nicol' who turned out to be my cousin Jimmie, born on Iririki.⁹

My father's work load was, as usual, heavy and carried out at break-neck speed. Fixing Customs accounts and arranging for goods to be sent to Kerr Bros stores on Tongoa and Mai islands and 'with our labour and getting their accounts in order'. We also still had property at Nangire, near Erakor,

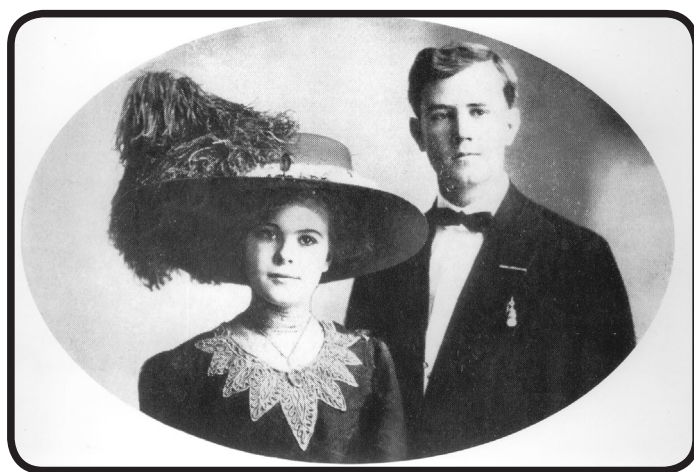


Photo 5: Photo from *I Married Adventure* by Osa Johnson publ. Hutchinson, London 1940. Osa Johnson 1894-1953 and Martin Johnson 1884-1937. They went to New Hebrides in 1917 and 1919 to photograph cannibals. They were born in the USA and married in 1910. Martin Johnson first went to the New Hebrides in 1908 with Jack London on the *Snark*. He wrote a book about this trip: *Through the South Seas with Jack London*.

where there were 52 cattle agisted which he then sold to M. Largeau 'as they are in a very bad state for want of feed'.¹⁰

Between times he found time to play tennis at Merton King's, going across on the launch to Iririki and up the white steps, and to play bridge at Seagoes—both passions of my father's.

As he was about to return to Sydney by *Makambo* in early June, another family member—this time my mother's sister, Esther Else—arrived in Vila to have a baby, a daughter, Lola. Essie and her husband Lou were at that time still managing Kerr Bros store on Tongoa.

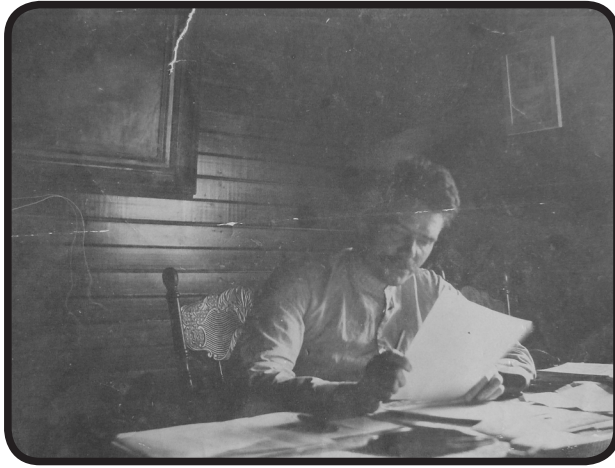


Photo 6: Graham Kerr at Turtle Bay Plantation (undated) circa 1918–19

When *Makambo* reached Norfolk Island the passengers were allowed ashore after a day's delay. Graham Kerr thought it fairly senseless. 'They are afraid of influenza although the Islanders are swarming on board the ship.'

He spent the rest of 1919 in Sydney looking after that side of the business. On 19 July his diary revealed exactly what he thought about the world situation:

Public holiday today for Peace?
Hard to see the peace with a world full
of poverty and the rich, richer than ever, combination of powers and militarism bristling
on all sides, rights of small nations trampled on except when it suits the great? powers.
Money rules in all countries.

Nearly one hundred years into the future it is hard to see what is different. My father thought that if only money was removed, all would be well. But money is closely linked with power which is surely the name of the game, and the solution, if there is one, lies elsewhere.

To explain what may seem a simplistic solution on his part, the Russian Revolution of 1917 had just swept away the entrenched privilege of centuries and there was hope in the air.¹¹ The diary entry was a premonition of horrors that would engage mankind for the rest of the twentieth century, horrors that Graham Kerr at that time could not have imagined or believed.

But his hope for the future, in the very same entry for 19 July 1919, about a new development, aviation, was more firmly founded:

During May there were attempts to fly direct from Nova Scotia to Ireland for which prize of 10,000 pounds was offered by the *Daily Mail*? Hawker (NZ) nearly completed the run, being picked up close to the coast of Ireland. Later in the month an American seaplane machine flew from America to England via the Azores and other stops. In June a British airship (dirigible) R34 flew from England to America and is returning.

From the beginning he believed that aviation was the way of the future and, with the slow mileage he covered in Sydney in the sulky and getting to and from the islands by ship, what a boon it would have been to have been able to fly.

Graham Kerr's life was regulated by the arrival and departure of *Pacifique* and *Makambo*, dealing with clients and their needs and booking them into accommodation if they were not familiar with Sydney while getting island products, copra and cocoa, unloaded and disposed of; and other goods ordered by clients in the islands safely aboard. This was a mammoth task which engaged everyone in the office.

In New Hebrides at an official level things were happening that would redound on those who lived there, Indigenous and foreign.

On 29 July Merton King notified the Western Pacific High Commissioner, C.H. Rodwell, that he had been reliably informed that 500 coolies from French Cochinchina were about to be recruited

for labour service in the New Hebrides.¹² M. Lippmann, acting French Resident Commissioner, had previously gone to Java for the purpose of engaging Javanese labour—to no effect.

The French High Commissioner for the Western Pacific—Jules Repiquet—went on leave in May 1919 and the French Resident Commissioner in Vila—M. Miramende—having been in his job since November 1913, also went on leave later in the year, his place being taken by M. Solari. Did this presage other changes?

The problem of labour refused to go away, complicated by the fact that such labour the planters could get quite often absconded and could not be forced back. French efforts were more successful. Figures for native labour recruited between January and June 1919 showed that the British only managed 109, including re-engagements against 410 for the French; its number included 94 woman.¹³

With not enough labour to run plantations successfully, it is no wonder that efforts were made to attract enterprising Islanders who had entered the field and buy their copra. Competition between planters, British and French, to sign up these Islanders was keen—cut-throat would be a better word.

Edward Jacomb, versed in both British and French law, had recently returned to the New Hebrides and was making his presence felt. He was a strong supporter of Indigenous rights and gained the dislike of the French for defending various cases of non-payment of salaries and wrongful imprisonment, etc. He was also known to the Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC) as a firebrand whose actions rocked the Condominium-boat too violently and went against the fixed policy of the British Colonial Office (C.O.) towards the New Hebrides.

Tacit support for the New Hebrides Mission (NHM) was of course part of that policy but it was tempered support. The combination of Jacomb and the New Hebrides Mission, and its use of him to get further publicity for its rabid policies was the main problem. The Islanders certainly needed help; there was ample evidence that they were being cheated by the French, but the way Jacomb went about it caused worse controversy.

When Merton King learned that Jacomb had ‘sounded certain missionaries as to obtaining signatures of natives to a petition of their desire for the entire control of the Group being assumed by Great Britain’, King the soul of tact, who through many years had done his part to keep the Condominium on the rails, considered him to have been indiscreet.¹⁴ He too had closely and impartially studied the problem of Islanders being overrun and dictated to by white men and was under no illusions.

Such a petition would be valueless he wrote.

Any marks, or signatures that would be obtained would, with the exception of one or two islands where the whole population could be got at, be merely those of the people of the coast villages who are more or less under mission influence and who do not represent a tithe of the population. Of those that signed, by far the large majority would have done so, either because they were asked, or because they considered that they had to; in the same way the same people would ‘sign’ a prayer for French rule with equal readiness if it were put before them.

Exactly the same opinion given decades earlier by Captain Macleod who also knew the Islanders. It was also the opinion of most settlers in the Group not under mission influence, including Graham Kerr.

King went further:

If the real mind of the native ... could be read I should not be surprised if that of the majority, were a reflection of the view expressed to the writer [King] by a very intelligent man of Epi who had served several years in Queensland, and spoke English fluently and correctly. ‘If’, he remarked, ‘we were asked, we should say: let the white man, English and French, go altogether, we don’t want them.’

That certainly posed a problem with implications that nobody at that time, least of all the white settlers, were prepared to face. It also explained how and why the Islanders acted as arbitrarily as they

did. To get the best deal they could in a situation over which they had no control, both white and black people were trying to get on with their lives as best they could.

King was also trying to get land-claim work resumed. Many claims including those of the Kerrs prepared for them by Edward Jacomb who was their solicitor, had been put into the Joint Court in 1913. It was now 1919 and the war was over so that excuse for not working no longer existed. All settlers were eager for the court's resumption and but for the interruption many claims may have been determined.

G. Borgesius, who was appointed as Native Advocate, had been acting-President since Esperanza had gone on leave in 1916 and he too needed a vacation. Esperanza was making all sorts of excuses to delay his return; the one related to salary paid in depreciated French francs was valid—as it was for other Condominium officials paid in the same currency. The fact that Condominium officials were all duplicated with British and French equivalents made for very expensive government and it was no wonder talk of its abandonment was in the air.¹⁵

Other things were also 'in the air'. Graham Kerr's diary entry for 11 December ran:

Ross Smith and his crew arrived at Darwin yesterday, having flown from England in 28 days. They gain the Commonwealth Government's prize of 10.000 pounds for the first to accomplish the trip. There are several other machines on the way.

Whatever else was also on the way, the twentieth century was slowly speeding up. Even the price of the daily newspaper in Sydney rose from one penny to a penny-halfpenny on 1 September.

The year ended for Kerr Bros in a new, if temporary, office while Union House in George Street was being built. All was going ahead nicely and my father's sister Agnes was due back in Sydney on



Photo 7: Children's New Year Party at the end of 1919 given by Muriel and Graham Kerr. Top row Thelma Bell, unknown woman and child, Katherine Kerr (2 years) with feathered hat, probably resting on Miss Devlin to her left, Kathleen Bell behind and between Katherine and Miss Devlin, Beatrice Mashman née Hutton (1886–1963, Muriel Kerr's oldest sister) at the back right behind Miss Devlin, Clara Hutton (1904–1985, Muriel Kerr's youngest sister), the rest are unknown. Front row sitting left to right Joyce Kerr, Sheila Mashman, Muriel (Gem) Kerr, unknown, Bruce Mashman. To the right behind Gem Kerr is Alan Mashman. The photo was taken by Muriel Kerr and some of the caption is hers with additions by the editor and Lindsay Benaud.

Pacifique from her second trip to the New Hebrides where she audited the books of all the firm's stores. She and her elder sister Mary looked after the day-to-day management of the Sydney office to their brothers' complete satisfaction and made a good job of it at a time when such work was not considered a woman's occupation.

With the birth of Margaret (Beatrice Margaret Lennox) on 12 September 1919 our family was now four daughters and our mode of transport when it wasn't walking or tram or ferry was still the sulky drawn by Gindy, now too small to accommodate us. My father toyed with the idea of a phaeton. Cars were few and far between at that time and air transport still only a dream.



Endnotes

- 1 I think the tram still terminated at Broughton Loop, near the Fire Station in those days, so there was still a walk to reach home.
- 2 WPHC 353/1919. British recruiting licenses issued in 1919.
- 3 Owing to rivalry between the two shipping lines Burns Philp and Co and *Messageries Maritimes* there was bad feeling between them as M.M. only had to do 2 days quarantine each trip because the voyage between Sydney and Noumea took 7 days—plenty of time for any case of the disease to manifest itself before the ship reached its destination—whereas B.P.'s itinerary via Lord Howe, Norfolk and Vila did not have that safe-guard and 4 days quarantine was required.
- 4 Grandfather Hutton, my mother's father was Manager of the State Brickworks at Homebush and had a car at his disposal. I have distinct memories of Grandfather sitting next to his chauffeur, clad in a dust coat in an open tourer and being very impressed. With few cars and no paved roads dust coats would have been very necessary.
- 5 This is where all foreign shipping anchored in Sydney Harbour—in midstream, hence the name Neutral Bay.
- 6 For a full account of this visit which covered eight months see Johnson, Osa, *I married adventure: the lives and adventures of Martin and Osa Johnson*. London, Hutchinson and Co., 1940, chaps 11–13, pp. 126–160.
- 7 See Johnson, Martin, *Cannibal-land: adventures with a camera in the New Hebrides*. London, Constable, 1922. The quotation comes from p. 27. There is a short film taken by Osa and Martin at <https://thoseawfulreviews.wordpress.com/2013/06/03/among-the-cannibal-isles-of-the-south-pacific-robertson-cole-1918/>
- 8 There was considerable difference of opinion about the incubation period. Despite the Western Pacific High Commission agreement that it was 48 hours from time of contact, both Australia and New Zealand insisted on 7 days. In New Caledonia the 48 hours ruling was accepted. By the end of 1918 Tonga had been badly affected—Islanders more so than Europeans; 1595 Indigenes as against 19 Europeans. See WPHC 41/1919 King to Rodwell, 10 Jan 1919.
- 9 Only son of James Marshall Nicol and Flora Jane Nicol, née Kerr. A daughter Rachel had been born earlier in May 1916.
- 10 Fernand Largeau at this time was back on his beautiful estate, Bellevue, up on the hill behind Vila.
- 11 Like many people at that time, my father—an idealist—thought that the new Russia was the hope of the world. 'Russia is beset on all sides by Britain and her cut-throat assistants of all nationalities, to prevent her carrying out her own ideas. Our action in Russia is to our everlasting disgrace. No matter that thousands and thousands of woman and children may be starving in Russia, we take all measures possible to prevent supplies reaching a country we are invading for our money lenders. We accuse Germany of atrocities but we need not go beyond ourselves'. Like all idealists he was one-eyed but it is hard not to conclude that the policies of the day were as always based on that dirty word expedience. No one at that time would have believed the horrors involved in the carrying out of Russia's 'own ideas'.
- 12 WPHC 1773/1919.
- 13 WPHC 1778/1919, King to Rodwell, 8 Aug 1919.
- 14 WPHC 2330/1919, King to Rodwell, 20 Oct 1919. Includes the next quotation.
- 15 Tiby Hagen was one of those hopeful that France would win. From a letter Tiby to Les Mitchell 4 Dec 1919 regarding the use of a boat: 'Not much doing with her but it all depends upon how the New Hebrides question is going to be settled, and should it be, as it ought to be, that is French, I shall have plenty to do for two craft. Burns Philp's likely retirement and the fact of the French government being willing to give 2000 coolies from Tonkin, would lead one to suppose that this question would be decided in favour of the French.' See PMB No 1091. Zeitler Adolph Corres, etc 1899–1935, Archive Box 23. Earlier in the year Tiby had tricked Lizzie Zeitler into signing over her plantation at Ringdove to him, supposedly to safeguard it. She copied out in her own writing and signed a paper that Tiby had written but there were no witnesses to her signature. See also PMB No 1091. 'Elizabeth Zeitler [née Macleod] widow of the late George Facio 23 June 1919'. She thought she was married to Dolph Zeitler but he had married previously in South Australia which fact Tiby had warned him to keep to himself. Tiby wanted to own Ringdove himself and managed to trick his less astute uncle, Dolph Zeitler, Lizzie's supposed husband.

Chapter 2 1920: The Kerrs' First Permanent Home in Sydney, Kermadec, Osborne Park, Lane Cove



Photo 8: The Kerr sisters January 1920: Joyce 6 holding Margaret, born on 12 September 1919, Katherine 2, Muriel (Gem) 3.

Graham Kerr spent the whole of 1920 away from the New Hebrides, busy getting his family firmly established in Sydney.

The owners of 'Mountain View' were returning from a trip overseas so now began the search for another place to live. It needed to be big with plenty of space for gardens for vegetables, flowers and to run a cow as there was talk at that time of tuberculosis being spread from tainted milk. The idea was for Tom Polman to milk the cow and look after the garden and do odd jobs as my father was in no way a 'home body' and in any case he was much too busy in the office. After looking all over the North Shore and beyond, my father finally settled on a lovely old house set in three acres of land at Osborne Park, Lane Cove. It cost one thousand six hundred pounds and was the property of W.M. Hughes, Prime Minister of Australia, who had left there after his wife died in 1916, tenants being put in occupation.¹

We did not move in till mid-year. My father named our new home Kermadec, not only because it fitted well with the name Kerr but because he had a soft spot for the Kermadec Islands. This became our much-loved home until 1947. Surrounded by camphor laurel trees—ideal for climbing—and our own cubby house built between two gum trees in the back yard which extended as unspoilt bush with its own creek down to where the golf course now is, just above River Road. The local children wanted to



Photo 9: The earliest photo we have of the Kerr family home Kermadec, 6 Richardson Street, Osborne Park, Lane Cove, Sydney c. 1926, with Muriel and Len Kerr in the foreground. The property was bought by Graham Kerr from Billie Hughes in 1920. The family lived there until 1948.

play in our yard while we envied them being able to play in the street. As for the cow—cream for cream puffs was all very well now and then. But the cream was not made into butter as my father, brought up on a dairy farm in New Zealand, expected of my mother. Years later a friend told me how much she enjoyed coming to afternoon tea at our place especially for cream puffs which my mother made to perfection. I laughed and confessed that all we wanted as children were the plaster of Paris yellow and mauve meringues we saw in cake-shop windows.

In February *Tamarina* was sold in Vila to Burns Philp. Burns Philp was at the time paying off its company because of the on-going engineers strike in Sydney which paralysed shipping schedules and would not be over until the end of February.

This meant that another schooner for recruiting had to be found for Hugh Kerr at Turtle Bay. As my father had such luck in New Zealand with other vessels he decided to try there again. He found it pleasant to meet up with various members of his New Zealand family but no schooner eventuated and he was back in Sydney in early April.

Here he found a craft to his liking, the *White Heather*, which was delivered alongside the *St Antoine* at Woolloomooloo on 1 June to make the trip to Noumea on *St Antoine's* deck. Hugh Kerr had come from Santo for the occasion and accompanied the *White Heather* with Captain Weatherall who would run her when they arrived. At Noumea they were off-loaded and picked up a passenger, one of the Thomas brothers of Hog Harbour plantation.

At this time my father was very busy moving his family into Kermadec and looking after Mme. Klehm, by now a close family friend, who—her long sojourn in New Hebrides since 1886 now over—was in Sydney with her nephew, M. Spenlé, while they awaited a passage to Europe in *Naldera*.

On 16 June 1920 the Prince of Wales on board HMS *Renown* arrived in Sydney to great acclaim, the city being brightly illuminated.

I seem to have remembered the excitement of going with my father in the dark in a ferry to see Sydney Harbour all lit up, utterly entranced at a seeming-bottle of sparkling red wine perched on high above Circular Quay being poured into a glass. But that memory was of a later occasion when the American Fleet came into Sydney Harbour in 1922. At only two and a half I did not see these 1920 illuminations and only imagined them. My mother saw them though.

On 9 July my father's interest in flying was again stirred by the

... first aeroplanes to fly from Sydney to Brisbane, and Sydney to Melbourne. Both left this morning and did the journey during the day.

In July there was a rearrangement of family business affairs. Graham, Hugh, Mary and Agnes Kerr agreed to buy out the shares held by Hannah Kerr, widow of their eldest brother Jim who had died in 1912. Hannah had two children Walter and Bess and needed the money for living expenses.

By mid-July my father's youngest sister, Bella, and her husband Jack Webb, arrived in Sydney from Brisbane. It was decided that Hugh Kerr needed a holiday as he had had bad malaria. Jack Webb would

look after Turtle Bay plantation in his absence. Hugh remained on hand until Jack got the hang of things. As Bella was pregnant, the presence of my aunt Jane was also helpful. On 28 July Agnes Kerr left Sydney on *Makambo* on one of her auditing trips to the islands. She was followed three days later by Bella and Jack Webb on *Pacifique*. This was an extremely busy time for my father with orders to fulfil for both ships and a depleted staff. He averaged about 4 hours in bed—‘one night 3 hours, two nights, 4 hours’.

At the same time, he was still the pioneer ‘boy’ from a New Zealand dairy farm with no time (or perhaps inclination) to sit and contemplate or read. On 7 August he

... got a plough and horses [from a person who lived near Kermadec] and ploughed up a piece of land to grow potatoes—building a fowl house and cutting a track through the bush for Joyce crossing to school at Longueville.

But he was also as modern in his thinking as the minute after midnight for, on 31 August, he remarked:

Parer and McIntosh arrived from England by aeroplane after about 7 months on the way—they arrived in Sydney on 22 August. They left during the week for Melbourne but wrecked the machine in a forced landing. They got another machine and continued the trip arriving in Melbourne.



Photo 10: The Lockhart Bell family was close to the Kerr family and for Bell family context I have included a photo from Book 1 taken in Vila from 1910 (ed.) Standing at the back: Mrs Lockhart Bell. Next row: Doris Bell; Miss Kinsey (Mrs Bell's sister), Thelma Bell (later married to Philip Keegan, British Condominium staff); Flora Kerr; Kathleen Bell.

By 15 September Graham Kerr was advertising for a man to take over the store on Tonga as Lou Else, whose health was not good, wanted to leave the New Hebrides as soon as possible. With the war now over many men were seeking jobs and he received 250 replies. By 12 October he had selected a man named J. Thompson.

My father loved company and most of the visitors to Kermadec who were not family were friends with New Hebridean connections, like the Lockhart Bell family who lived in Strathfield, Sydney, while their breadwinner—William Lockhart Bell—worked as British Condominium Customs officer in Vila; and the Ashtons, which family he got to know earlier in the century when the Kerr Bros office was

situated in George Street not far from Julian Ashton's studio. The Reids and the Usshers who had previously lived in the Islands were now settled in Lane Cove.

On 5 October Graham Kerr had a letter published in the *Evening News* on the copra trade with New Hebrides and the chaotic way it was landed on the wharves, which he warned was driving much trade from Sydney.

By the end of October, he, with only Mary Kerr to help him in the office had hardly a minute to himself. He also had four children with whooping cough, Margaret, the baby being very ill. I hesitate to think how my mother must have felt with her sick children and a husband who was always on the go. But he even found time to play tennis against the Ryde team and ‘beat them easily’. At this time he was 47 years old which was fairly old for those times.

On 17 November Annie Petersen—her Vysuck Property still in contention—signed a legal document which showed that the rights she had sold to the British Government through Kerr Bros did not



Photo 11: Postcard of Lockhart Bell children at 'Vila', Redmyre Road, Strathfield, Sydney, 1913. The family was living at the same address in 1920. Written on the postcard is 'Taken 19th October 1913. On the 15th anniversary of my sister's wedding day.' (Likely) standing left to right Kathleen Bell, Thelma Bell and Doris Bell. Seated child is probably Joyce Bell. I include this photo as it was not included in Book I and as the Lockhart Bells were close to the Kerr family and looked after the Kerr children from time to time. Graham Kerr was influenced by William Lockhart Bell's decision to move his wife and children from Vila to Sydney for the sake of his children's education (ed.)

include the salt water frontage. Annie lived with Graham Kerr's sisters Mary and Agnes in Sydney and needed money for her living expenses and there were plenty of would-be buyers if only the problem were solved. But in the New Hebrides that took time and patience.

By 18 December my father was laying felt on the staircase at Kermadec and helping my mother get ready for a children's party 'about 50 came—children and grown-ups, the children had a very good time ... a few of the party stayed to tea in the evening'.

On 20 December *Pacifique* arrived with Hugh

Kerr who now felt he could leave Jack Webb in charge. Jane Kerr had stayed on with Bella. Also Agnes, her audit complete, was at Turtle Bay with her youngest sister Bella, awaiting the next boat back to Sydney. The year was ending well.

We children thought so anyway, for on Christmas Day Grandma Hutton held a fantastic party, Santa Claus, Christmas tree—the lot—all organised by her youngest daughter Clare. Father Christmas even arrived by aeroplane. A noisy vacuum cleaner of the period, set going in the spare room, attended his landing while we children were otherwise engaged.

My father did not hold with Christmas. He went and played tennis. As a good Scot, New Year's Day was the day for celebration so we children had two parties.

Much had happened in the New Hebrides during the year. This forms the background of Graham Kerr's activities in Sydney and was the subject of many of the spirited often angry seeming conversations that took place at Kermadec throughout the year.

As we grew older, we realised that what we heard at home was quite different from the conversations in the homes of our Australia friends to whom the New Hebrides was a foreign place and not of great moment. In fact Australian interest in the Group was largely political and whipped up by adverse reports in the newspapers from New Hebrides Mission sources which were far from disinterested.

We did not realise that life in a multi-race society such as the Condominium brought forth violently antagonistic views in Australia. We were too young to judge for ourselves and were gradually repelled by the whole subject which must have been sad for my father. We just did not like feeling different from our friends.

If people had German antecedents, as the Freeman family who lived on Aneityum did, they could not get passports to visit Sydney, despite the fact that before the war they frequently visited Australia.² Their forebear, Friedrich Freeman, was born in Stettin. Resident in the Group since 1872 he had not bothered to change his nationality. Merton King wrote to the Western Pacific High Commissioner on the Freemans' behalf: 'By education, training and sentiment they are entirely British ... the only relations of whom they have any knowledge are English'. He was prepared to give them a Certificate of Identity. Burns Philp and Company was also using its influence with the Australian Government.

This year a Presbyterian Delegation would also bring the bogey of Japanese infiltration in the Group to the ears of the Australian Prime Minister, W.M. Hughes. At this time the number of Japanese did not exceed one hundred.

Showing another unresolved aspect of Joint Rule in the New Hebrides, Merton King reported to Cecil Rodwell that the French government had approved the sum of 60.000F (2400 pounds sterling) being spent on repair and maintenance of roads in the town and neighbourhood of Vila.³ These he said could be called Public Works to be undertaken in common:

France has no right to embark on this undertaking without our consent. However as we have repeatedly refused to apportion funds for this object, it would ill become us to enter any protest against our partner's taking on themselves alone the execution of this very necessary and beneficial work—most of the work to be carried out in French territory.

King thought this would greatly enhance French prestige 'at the expense of the British'.

The French, with a much larger number of settlers, had in mind eventual French annexation whereas the British government did not want to spend any money on a place they did not want. Unlike in Suva with its solid buildings and well-kept infrastructure, British settlers in Vila felt like second-class citizens.

There were also increasing problems with the discrepancy in value of the two currencies, francs and sterling. King wanted a Joint regulation to control the outgoing of silver currency from New Hebrides to New Caledonia where export of coinage was forbidden.⁴ Settlers in New Hebrides were badly inconvenienced by the lack of small coinage in circulation.⁵

The French were now offering a bonus to their Condominium staff to make up for the falling exchange rate which, said King, showed no signs of improving—54F to the pound sterling. England would have to do something for her British staff, including H. O'Reilly, British Judge; K. Mackenzie, Superintendent of Works; H. Piermont, Clerk of the Joint Court; W. Le Couteur, Interpreter to the Joint Court; W.L. Bell, Assistant Collector of Customs; J.M. Nicol, Government Agent on Tanna; T.R. Salisbury, Government Agent on Santo; A.V. Middleton, Radio Operator; and M. McCoy, Telephonist. All paid in francs.

Besides these there were three foreign members of the Condominium, Count Buena de Esperanza, titular Head of the Joint Court, Dr Borgesium Acting Head, and J. de Leener who was actually Registrar but acting Public Prosecutor.

To make matters worse, Borgesium, who had been wanting to go on leave since 1916, left for Europe on 14 May 1920 and the Court was now closed or, as King told Rodwell later in the year, 'in a state of suspended animation', with the French still shilly-shallying with the British Foreign Office about its reopening. King wanted the cases which were waiting for a hearing to be tried before the National Courts as had been the case before the Joint Court was set up. He was told to wait until Esperanza returned towards the end of July but King pointed out that Esperanza had several times before announced his intention of returning and that 'there has been no sitting of the court for eight months'.⁶

Esperanza described the Condominium to the British Ambassador in Madrid as 'a great failure' and it would hardly be worth his while to return to the New Hebrides if it came to an end. Both British and French governments thought it very unlikely that anyone else would accept the job, and France was very pleased that the main work of the Joint Court—the adjudication of land claims—was in abeyance. Then the British Judge O'Reilly resigned in June with health problems. Who would be willing to replace him if his salary was to be paid in devalued French currency?

Naturally both British and French settlers in the Group were angry that all these salaries were still to be paid although no work was done to merit them. In the meantime they had their taxes increased with no observable benefit. The Condominium was proving too unwieldy and expensive to run and Merton King thought they had a point.

Later, in April 1921, replying to a despatch from the Governor-General of Australia to Sir Cecil Rodwell—which arose from a Delegation from the Presbyterian Church of Australia to the Prime Minister, suggesting that New Hebrides needed to be taken over—King said:

I have been assured on good authority that the British settlers would prefer French annexation to British, as they fear the latter would mean *cession to Australia*. If the Group could be made a Crown Colony, the voice of the British settler would, I have reason to believe, be heard in favour of that mode of settlement ... In conclusion, I would beg leave to submit, in regard to the Condominium, that imperfect as it doubtless is, an administration that has existed for 14 years cannot fairly be condemned as the unmentionable failure that its critics and opponents represent it as being.⁷

And King, never one to let his emotions take over, needed to be heard. Australia was where all the heated protests came from but never a genuine offer of help.

The telephone service too was not satisfactory. Messages could be received but no messages could be transmitted to Fiji, which was not to the liking of the Western Pacific High Commissioner who thought the French Wireless Operator was to blame. At a pinch the wireless telegraph service on *Makambo* and *Pacifique* could be called on, but ...

And as if that was not enough, King told Rodwell on 9 February that French recruiting operations for the last six months had been very successful—much more so than the British—1200 recruits for the French as against 277 for the British.⁸ The French figure included 269 women. No women were indentured by the British but 'as usual, a number followed their husbands into service'. The average wage paid by a British employer was about 13 pounds 40 pence per annum and natives well treated and well cared for. King said the French did the same and sometimes as a reward for good work they were handed a glass of wine or spirits, which was in accordance with French usage. King thought the work of the Labour Inspectors had been beneficial. As always King was even-handed and was at pains to damp down the many extravagant claims that emanated from Australia that the French were an immoral lot.

As for supply of labour, local sources could not meet the demand. France at the time was trying to help its nationals by importing coolies from its Indo-Chinese possessions but very heavy charges were involved which King did not think would succeed. As against this, he wrote, yellow labour was 'tabu' for the British settlers and Indian labour 'out of the question'.⁹ 'With a failing local supply to what quarter is he to look?'

In fact King was told on 30 June by J. Miramende, the French Resident, who had just returned from leave, that 'the introduction of Indo-Chinese labour to the New Hebrides has fallen through'.¹⁰ It was too expensive for the New Hebridean settler.

On 31 August 140 Tonkinese were landed in Vila by S.S. *St Michel*, part of a group brought to New Caledonia to work for the Nickel Company and Ballandes:

Those introduced here [Vila] were ... brought by [Ballandes] by whom they have been distributed mostly among settlers they are 'financing'.¹¹

Another view-point on the general outlook came from Tiby Hagen who wrote to Dolph Zeitler on 29 March 1920 that, with the rising of prices for wheat, rice and sugar in Sydney: 'The only place now in the world of any value at all, is the land, plantations and cattle.'¹² Some sort of change would have to take place.

And for the British settler this was not the only change in the offing. Merton King who had been British Resident Commissioner since 1907, reached the age of 65 on 10 July 1919 and was due for retirement.¹³

I do not think I am going too far when I say that the consummate tact he had displayed through the years in this most sensitive and difficult appointment was the only reason the Condominium had endured for so long. The British Government was well aware of this and wanted him to stay on the job 'until the position in regard to the New Hebrides becomes clearer. King told Rodwell that he was content to carry on indefinitely.'

At last the situation was being properly considered and the Governor-General of Australia requested a *résumé* of the affairs of the New Hebrides since the outbreak of war in 1914. In his report, King held nothing back.¹⁴ As regards the export trade, he said,

British operations have to the present been almost entirely confined to the production and purchase of coconuts from which copra is made ... The French however, though not neglecting copra, pay much attention to other products ... cocoa, coffee and cotton ... Maize ... appears to be now in disfavour ... It is said that the prices realised in Australia do not make Maize a profitable crop to the grower.

The preponderance of the French in the trade of the Group is apparent not only from the volume of exports shipped under their flag, but also from the means adopted to facilitate and encourage such trade. A steamer of the *Messageries Maritimes* Company pays a monthly visit to Vila and to the chief centres of French cultivation in the North, while two small steamers belonging to mercantile houses of Noumea, New Caledonia, are continually plying in the Group, buying native products for export and selling imported articles to European and native.

On our side the British mercantile marine, not long since represented by a monthly steamer in and out, now appears but at intervals of two months. For a short time, 1911-1913, an enterprising British firm established an inter-insular service with a steamer of modest tonnage. The first vessel foundered with much loss of life: the second proved an unsuccessful venture and was soon withdrawn from the service.

King is here referring to the *Tathra* chartered in 1911 by the young Kerr brothers, who were hoping to set up another British line to challenge Burns Philp and Company and to offer a service midway between solely British and solely French interests. The Kerr brothers had good friends in both camps and the notion was a sensible one in a country governed by two powers.

King was himself sympathetic but he knew that the Commonwealth subsidy to Burns Philp was part of Australia's policy to counter the French. He also knew that the Western Pacific High Commission would not be likely to provide another subsidy to help Kerr Bros even though Kerr Bros had offered to include a round trip via Suva and would run as a mail and passenger line only which would not permit trading.

It was a sore point with British settlers that Burns Philp that the company traded first and foremost on its own behalf and everything else came a poor second—except the obligatory trips to the Mission stations as stipulated in the terms of their subsidy.

As heirs of Captain Macleod, the Kerrs were from the first damned in the eyes of British Authorities. That they belonged to the New Hebrides British Association (NHBA)—which opposed the exaggerated ploys of the New Hebrides Mission and thought that the French settlers should be given a fair go—was also never going to help their cause.

The question of the viability of the Condominium loomed so large that Sir Cecil Rodwell, Western Pacific High Commissioner, included New Hebrides in a cruise on *Pioneer* he was making to the Solomons.¹⁵ He reached Vila on 19 September. Both Merton King and the French Resident, M. Miramende, dined on board *Pioneer*.

In his report Rodwell wrote that:

There is an air of depression about Vila ... the climate is not exhilarating. Now the high cost of living and the high rate of exchange, combined with a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the Condominium arrangement ... serve to accentuate the depression ... No doubt a Condominium was the best, perhaps the only arrangement which could be devised at the time it was instituted.

And he here paid tribute to the exceptional qualities of Merton King. 'There is little recreation at Vila largely owing to the absence of roads.' Rodwell gave an 'at Home' on board *Pioneer* which seemed to be greatly appreciated. 'About 50 visitors came off to the ship.'

On his way back from the Solomons he visited some of the northern islands of the Group including Hog Harbour where the Thomas brothers ran a plantation. Here he found a Mission hospital but the Missionary in charge had left and the hospital was falling into disuse. Rodwell concluded that

... what was primarily needed was medical rather than religious mission work ... There would be a much better field ... for educational and religious work among the natives if the way could be paved by attending first to their medical needs.

He also called in to the Second Channel where, on the advice of Mr T.R. Salisbury, British Government Agent on Santo, he met M. Choyer, manager of Ballandes plantation there, and was impressed with its good management.

He also visited the island of Wala off the east coast of Malekula where the pig cult prevailed and the islander with the greatest number of tusked pigs held the highest rank:

As much as 40 pounds is paid for a pig with good tusks. The natives apparently think of little else except pigs and bestow more care upon them than upon their children.¹⁶

Next port of call was Ambrym 'a gloomy island dominated by a volcano which erupted in 1913 with disastrous results to a native town and hospital situated beneath it on the coast'.¹⁷ The coastline was completely altered and they had to proceed to Ranon anchorage to the north.

French officials also visited the Group in 1920. Commander Giraud in the French Aviso, *Aldebaran*, was in the Group between 15 and 18 October, probably sounding out French and British settlers as to their opinions on the Condominium.

A Mr J.T. Caldwell was in the Group for a few weeks on board *Southern Cross* which was on its way to the Solomons. Resulting from this short visit, he wrote on 21 October to the Secretary of State for Colonies in London with his ideas for a solution of the New Hebrides problem.¹⁸ One of his suggestions was to give the French the southern islands of the Group with the Torres and Banks Groups to join the British Protectorate of the Solomons, the natives being given the 'right to emigrate to the British Solomons'.

On being asked his reaction, King wrote on 4 January 1921 that

Mr Caldwell's ignorance of the native character is evidenced by such a proposal and his mind is apparently undisturbed by any reflection of what kind of reception the New Hebridean immigrants would receive from the Solomon Islanders.

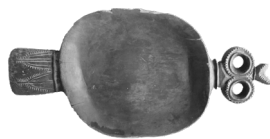
King dismissed Caldwell as just one of the many:

... who after a hurried tour through the islands, and exchanging views with a few settlers, consider themselves authorities on the subject and qualified to give an opinion on a much vexed question that has long exercised the minds of persons who, though better informed and more competent than themselves, are still unable to offer a satisfactory solution.

At the end of 1920 the political and medical situation in the New Hebrides was in urgent need of help. The John G. Paton Hospital on Iririki Island was run by the New Hebrides Mission with an annual grant of 250 pounds from the British Government. This plus a French hospital on the Efate mainland, maintained by the French government with a Medical Officer from the

French Colonial Service in charge, served the southern islands of the Group. The New Hebrides Mission hospitals on Tanna, Wala and Santo were closed from lack of medical staff. The French were thinking of placing a medical officer at the Segond Channel and also building and equipping a small hospital there.

With all the above complications one is led to wonder how my father and all other people who made their living in the New Hebrides did not become too discouraged to continue, but they took everything in their stride. What else could they do?



Endnotes

- 1 In the early 1990s Kermadec sold for a million and a quarter dollars.
- 2 WPHC 625/1920, King to Rodwell, 10 Jan 1920. Ada Freeman needed to go to Sydney for medical treatment. See also WPHC 169/1920, WPHC 187/1920 and WPHC 2522/1919. Deportation was also being considered of families Freeman, Schmidt, Hoffman, Behring, and Berg. King noted: 'They are all harmless and well-conducted people and I have no desire to take any steps to disturb them'. WPHC papers in Archive Boxes 21, 22 & 29. The National Library of Australia archive boxes will not be referred to beyond the few references in the endnotes of the first and second chapters to indicate how the archive boxes can be used. The archive boxes hold most documents referred to in the books.
- 3 WPHC 919/1920, King to Rodwell, 3 Feb 1920.
- 4 WPHC 922/1920, King to Rodwell, 4 Feb 1920.
- 5 Silver currency was also short in the Solomons where the Chinese were suspected of exporting it and in Tonga too where B.P and Co. were cornering it for their trade. See WPHC 1112/1920.
- 6 WPHC 3190/1920, King to Rodwell, 21 Dec 1920.
- 7 WPHC 3169/1920.
- 8 WPHC 953/1920.
- 9 See WPHC 953/1920.
- 10 WPHC 32/1920, King to Rodwell, 30 June 1920.
- 11 WPHC 1813/1920, King to Rodwell, 6 Sept 1920.
- 12 PMB No 1091 Zeitler, Adolphus Corres 1899–1935.
- 13 WPHC 1857/1920.
- 14 WPHC 2423/1920. The small steamers belonging to a French mercantile house referred to by King were probably St Andre and St Michel belonging to Ballandes whose H.Q. in New Hebrides was Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides (CFNH). The Noumea houses of Béchade and Gubbay also ran vessels as well as the Hagens.
- 15 WPHC 2787/1920, Report of Sir C. Rodwell 8 Nov 1920.
- 16 By taking heed of this pig-cult, D.H. Kerr and W.T. Robertson will on Turtle Bay Plantation manage to get the local labour they so badly needed to run the plantation. A little island was set aside on which pigs were bred and used successfully to 'buy' labour.
- 17 When I stayed overnight on Ambrym with my sister and niece in 1992, we felt the same gloom. Everywhere great black ropes of solidified lava dating from the 1913 volcanic eruption snaked their way through the thick foliage.
- 18 See WPHC 3009/1920. Caldwell's simplistic solution even led to an article in the Paris paper *Le Temps* which drew forth a telegram from Reuters: 'Smarting Sore. New Hebrides Condominium. Remedy Suggested' as reported in the *Sydney Sun* 31 Aug 1920. The article in *Le Temps* suggested that in exchange for the linking up of French possessions in the Pacific, 'France should pledge herself to a system of economic and naval association with Australasia and should assure the Australians that their commercial liberty would be respected and that no Asiatic immigration would be tolerated'. This attempt at appeasing Australasia including the New Hebrides Mission would not be taken up as cooperation with France was not the name of their game. They wanted France removed at all costs.

Chapter 3 1921: Esperanza Still in Europe, Unwilling to Return

The year started with Graham Kerr in Sydney playing in a tennis match with his club which they won. The next day 'a party of us went to Manly early taking lunch ... Home early before the crowd'. Among those who came home to tea and cards were Hugh Kerr and Will Ayton, as well as my mother's youngest sister Clare. My father loved taking us in the Manly ferry, even if it was rough crossing the Heads. He thought it was 'good for us'. Joyce, my eldest sister who was prone to sea-sickness did not agree with him and dreaded the trip.



Photo 12: Isabel Webb (1881-1921) née Kerr, youngest child of Flora Kerr née Macleod and James Walter Kerr probably taken in her early 20s. The original photo held by Margaret Kerr (cousin) was made by Thelma Studio 106a Kings Street Sydney.

The month went ahead without much comment until the *Pacifique* arrived in Sydney on 21 January and my father discovered that, contrary to her usual practice 'she did not go to all places in the New Hebrides, having met with an accident to her windlass at Epi and, after going to Pt. Sandwich, she returned to Noumea, just calling at Vila for mails and passengers [without anchoring]. She has practically no cargo from New Hebrides and very little in the way of orders.'

He did not then realise the importance of this change to her normal schedule, which meant that she had not visited Santo on this trip. Somebody on board told him that 'someone told him that our copra house at Santo was burned down'. Bad news of course but with D.H. Kerr recently back from Turtle Bay saying that all was well there, he left it that.

Makambo with Agnes and Flora Kerr on board arrived in Sydney on 30 January. The last time Agnes saw Jack and Bella Webb at Turtle Bay on Santo, Bella was well and had arranged to go to Vila to have her baby, due in March at the hospital on Iririki. She would go when *Pacifique* made its next round trip.

It was not until 15 February that:

The terribly bad news came through ... that Bella and Jack had died of malaria. That is all. There is some mistake as nobody dies of malaria itself. Agnes only left them a month ago and Jack then was having a little fever but nothing much and Bella was very well. I can only make out now that Jack died from fever and Bella died of shock. She was expecting a baby in about two months. The message is from Janie sent by radio from *Pacifique*. Hugh is leaving by first chance back.

When *Pacifique* arrived in Sydney on 23 February my father learned more from Theo Thomas who had arrived at Turtle Bay soon after the trouble:

Jack died about five days after Agnes left [about 15 January]. He had some malaria but apparently they did not think much of it. His heart must have been bad. Soon after the trouble Bella, with Janie, left for Vila, Weatherall taking them to Segond Channel with the *White Heather*. They went to stay on Choyer's place to wait for the *Pacifique*. The waiting was too much for Bella and her baby was born on a Saturday but did not live. Bella then seemed to give in and died the following Thursday.

Choyer and the Segond Channel people were very good and did all they could but it wanted medical skill. Had the *Pacifique* been up to time and Bella got down to Vila she would have had a chance. The whole Northern Group is left without a medical man and yet the disastrous Condominium Government collect enough taxes but, all eaten away in their official salaries.

As we already know, this was the trip when the *Pacifique* did not make it to Santo so Bella could not have got to Vila in any case. The baby was born dead on 5 February and Bella died on 11 February. It must also have been harrowing for Jane who was with her. She too had lost a baby in February 1917 at Turtle Bay with only Uncle Hugh on hand to help deliver it. My father certainly had a point when he said that the medical necessities were missing although. The French were about to remedy matters but this was too late for helping the highly-traumatised Bella.¹

I was too young at the time to know of this family tragedy and I never remember my parents talking of it except the bare outline. But while researching for this book I came across the following information about Bella's husband in a Western Pacific High Commission record.

On 19 April 1921 a man E. Robinson of Cloncurry, North Queensland, wrote to the Western Pacific High Commissioner asking to be supplied with the death certificate of Zacharias Webb late of Santo, whose death is reported to have taken place on 15 January 1921.² He was writing on behalf of his sister Mrs Webb:

This man left his wife and cleared away with another woman. The woman has reported his death to his people and I would like if possible to find out if this is correct. It might only be a hoax on her part, to try and gain her end.

The death of Jack Webb was no 'hoax' and the end Bella 'gained' was certainly not one she would have chosen. I have no knowledge whether Bella contacted Jack Webb's people in Queensland. Was his name Jack and or perhaps Zach? I have often wondered why Bella lived in Brisbane when the rest of her New Zealand family lived in Sydney. In my father's 1919 diary he remarked that Bella left Sydney for Brisbane for a holiday in early January of that year. Is that when she met Jack Webb? There was never the vaguest suggestion in the family that she was not Mrs Jack Webb. Perhaps her family did not know? Perhaps my father did not know that Jack had a weak heart either.

Merton King, always the soul of discretion, having previously been in touch with Mrs Zacharius Webb in Queensland and knowing that both the Webbs from Santo and their baby were dead in tragic circumstances, searched the register with a negative result. There was no death certificate for Zacharias Webb. The subject was closed.

Jack Webb was buried at Turtle Bay plantation and Bella and her baby somewhere near the Dart Anchorage towards the western end of the Segond Channel. In 1922 while my father was there waiting for *Pacifique* to arrive, he arranged for her grave site to be tidied and a little tablet to be affixed to the stone—just another of the many deaths of white women in childbirth in the New Hebrides.

One of those who caught the trip of *Pacifique* that missed out on Santo was Tiby Hagen who unexpectedly caught it by launch from Diamond Bay Epi. He wrote to his uncle, Dolph Zeitler, who till recently lived on Mapuna Plantation, but was at present in Sydney, regarding 'the annuity guaranteed to you for a minimum of 6 years'.³ Tiby considered he was behaving justly to Dolph because of those depending on him, one of those being Lizzie Zeitler (in fact still Facio, although she did not know it), whose plantation at Ringdove Tiby had taken over by trickery. Tiby mentioned Dolph's liking for drink

and that he must sign the pledge. Was that why the astute Tiby was able to put it over Dolph in the first place? Another unsolved mystery.

Before Hugh Kerr could return to Santo, he and my father looked for a new craft for the islands and Hugh went to Tasmania on 12 January to see what was on offer there.

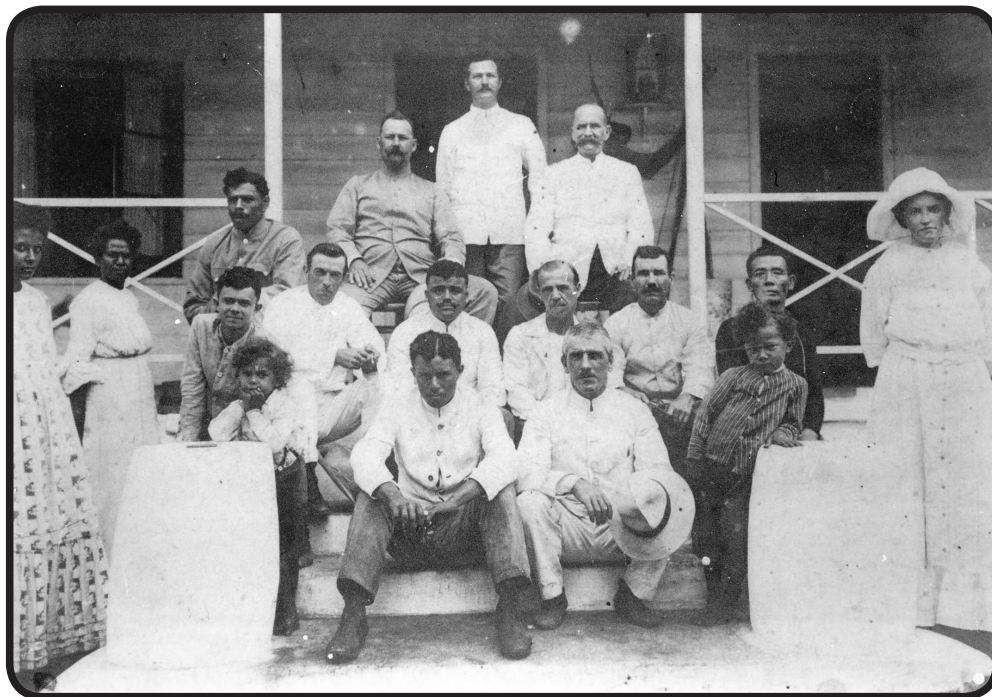


Photo 13: Top row from left: Tiby Hagen, John Leslie Mitchell and Adolph Zeitler (uncle of the first two); Lizzie Macleod/Facio/Zeitler is the second Indigenous woman on the left; the other people's names are unknown. The photo was taken in front of Lizzie's plantation house at Ringdove Bay, Epi, New Hebrides, circa 1920. Photo from George Mitchell in Vila and I have permission to use it.

Various members of the family were in Sydney early in the year including Flora, wife of J. M. Nicol, Government Agent on Tanna. Their two children, Ray and Jimmie, were at this time staying on healthy Norfolk Island and, on 8 February my father saw Flora off on *Makambo* to visit them on her way back to Tanna.

Business was doing well and more storage space had to be found for cocoa beans which were being sent to the firm in large quantities for disposal. He interviewed various chocolate manufacturers, including Smalls. On 14 June he sold 25 tons of cocoa at 46 pounds per ton to Stedman-Henderson. At the same time he and mother had a busy social life meeting Island friends, the Austins, the Usshers and Mr and Mrs Julian Ashton⁴ who came to dine and play cards.⁵

There is also mention of Julius Petersen who, whenever he came to Sydney from Mate Wulu Plantation, near Turtle Bay, always bought his Indigenous family to Kermadec to dinner. We children as we grew older realised that the people who visited our place were very different from those of our Australian friends.

Where Graham Kerr found the time and energy to play in various tennis matches, plus go to the Sydney office at 7am each morning including Saturday, I cannot imagine, but his diary provides evidence to that effect.

Hugh Kerr's visit to Tasmania paid off. He found a suitable craft, *Lunawanna*, paying a deposit of 250 pounds. He was back in Sydney by 16 March and left the following day by *Drahn* for Noumea on his way back to Turtle Bay leaving Graham Kerr to go to Hobart to take delivery by 31 March.

The latter was also making arrangements for a room to be built at Kermadec for Tom Poleman to occupy and look after things while he was in Tasmania. Tom, a very trustworthy and much-liked New Hebridean who regarded us as his family, did other jobs, as required, like helping with cargo, first unloaded from vessels into lighters and from there into a store room to await delivery, at a time when everything was 'man-handled'. If things were sufficiently urgent my father even lent a hand.

Accompanied by Captain Russell, who was to take the new craft to the New Hebrides, Graham Kerr reached Hobart on 17 March.



Photo 14: Either Turtle Bay or Mate Wulu plantation, Santo, probably second decade of the 1900s. Back row: 2 native staff; Graham Kerr, unknown, Donald Hugh Kerr, native attendant. Sitting: Koevira Petersen, Indigenous wife of Julius Petersen; Julius Petersen, Mrs D.H. Kerr (Jane Kerr). (This photo was taken many years before 1921—and was used in Book 1—but it shows the New Hebridean friends who visited the Kerrs in Sydney ed.)

He was ... up early the next day and had a look around. The *Lunawanna* is in. She is a nice little thing—looks well and sails well. She hasn't been beaten in her class and is Cock-of-the-Walk. She carries the Cock on her main mast.⁶

Certain alterations were needed, such as taking out her centre board and putting in a false keel and putting a galley on deck. If there was no reasonable offer to do these alterations my father wrote that he would send her down with centre board in and do the job at Turtle bay, Santo. Here the family employed a boat-builder named Kabota.

However the registered owner of *Lunawanna* did not arrive back in Hobart for my father to take delivery before he had to return to Sydney where both *Pacifique* and *Makambo* were due in port. His life was regulated by their arrival and departure—a very busy time for the office with cargo, as mentioned above, to be landed and disposed of, orders to be fulfilled for the return trips and the needs of visiting clients, many of them French, to be attended to in person. My father said he would be back later to take delivery and paid over the balance of the purchase money, 1350 pounds, to his solicitors there, to be paid to the vendor on completion of the Bill of Sale. While in Hobart my father and Captain Russell were taken to Eaglehawk Neck in a Sunbeam car: 'A splendid run'.

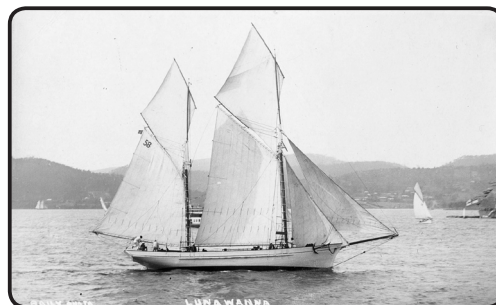


Photo 15: *Lunawanna* is mid-stream in the River Derwent, Makepeace Collection, Maritime Museum of Tasmania; not dated (P_2017-0086 p11a), and permission was granted to use it.

It was decided that, as my mother had not been well, she would accompany my father to Hobart when he returned to take delivery, which meant farming out his family of four little girls. Joyce and Margaret went to Miss Devlin's at Naremburn while Muriel and I accompanied Mary and Agnes Kerr and Annie Petersen, who lived with them, up to Glenbrook in the Blue Mountains.⁷

The travellers reached Hobart on 7 April and booked into the Imperial Hotel. This was my mother's first visit and she remembered with particular pleasure a visit to Mount Wellington where she and my father saw their first snow. Mostly my father was busy getting *Lunawanna* provisioned for the long trip to Vila. On the night of 12 April he stayed on board all night to keep watch as the mate and crew were suffering from 'beer'.

All perishables were on board by 13 April and *Lunawanna* was ready to sail early next morning, my



Photo 16: *Lunawanna* racing against *Speedwell* off Battery Point, not dated. The photo is from the O'May Collection, Maritime Museum of Tasmania (P_OM.G.10e *Speedwell*) and permission was granted to use it. (No copies of the photographs of *Lunawanna* taken by Muriel Kerr can be found ed.)

father taking the crew tobacco and a bottle of whiskey to see them on their way. The last was a somewhat strange item for a crew 'suffering from beer'. My mother with her camera took several photos as *Lunawanna* sailed by.

On their way back to Sydney on 18 April they stayed at the Federal Palace in Melbourne, their first visit to Victoria. 'To St Kilda in the evening. This place puts any holiday resorts in Sydney entirely in the shade'.

They were back home in time to celebrate their 12th wedding anniversary on 21 April and a few days later Richard My, youngest son of Emile My, arriving in Sydney on *Pacificque* came to stay with us at Kermadec.

Although the 'masses' would probably not have accepted Graham Kerr as one of 'them', he was one of the many idealistic—some might say simplistic—people of that era who thought that the Communists had the answer to the world's troubles. On 8 May after walking all

over the place without success to find a good Jersey cow so that his family had pure milk to drink he attended a May Day Rally in the Domain.

'Disgraceful carryings-on there. Carrying a Union Jack of any kind seems to be license to do anything. A very large crowd, but freedom missing.' There was scuffle and 'a few idiotic returned soldiers tried to rush their platform and pull the Red flag down and put up a small Union Jack'. Apparently the attackers did not succeed and there was a great to-do in the newspapers in the following days as to what the modern world was coming to.⁸

No one at that time could possibly have imagined what horrors were to come. The worldwide



Photo 17: Taken at Kermadec around April 1921: back row: unknown, Thelma Bell, Richard My, Mary Kerr, Agnes Kerr, Marmion Hawkesby; unknown woman (possibly Hawkesby's mother, Mrs Joe Hawkesby). The standing children in the middle row are unknown except for Muriel (Gem) Kerr blurred and fourth from the left. Very bottom row Joyce Kerr holding Margaret Kerr, unknown, Katherine Kerr.

trauma to the human psyche left by the First World War led to emotional excesses which were not dealt with before the Depression and the Second World War. It needed the dreadful message of the totalitarian governments of the future, that in no place but a democracy would such a meeting, as that described above, have been allowed to take place. There was no simple solution. Letting off steam in whatever direction was surely a safety valve?

Fortunately Graham Kerr had other things to exercise his mind. He learned on 21 May that *Lunawanna* had arrived in Vila in only five weeks. He did not know until the Tasmanian crew who had taken the ves-

sel to the New Hebrides arrived back in Sydney on 2 June that there would be trouble. One of the crew had injured himself on the outward trip. They were all put up in a boarding house by the firm until an X-ray of the man's knee was taken and two doctors who examined could confirm that he was not permanently injured. Relations between Kerr Bros and the crew were not pleasant. Unfortunately, when the vessel arrived in Vila, Hugh Kerr had not been there to take delivery so Emile My acted in his place:

Mr My had a terrible lot of trouble with these men in Vila and that old pig Russell was drunk from the time he arrived until the police took and put him in hospital.

This was something the strained *entente cordiale* that prevailed in the New Hebrides could well have done without.

D.H. Kerr wasted no time getting a permit from Merton King for Kerr Brothers of Santo to recruit 200 labourers on *Lunawanna*, their new auxiliary ketch.⁹

Graham Kerr got the recalcitrant crew on board *Moeroki* for their trip back to Tasmania on 7 June. When incensed, he was not given to moderating his language. He 'had a great time picking up the drunken pigs and shepherding them all the afternoon until about 6.30 when the steamer got away'. It was not that he did not like drink, there was always wine at dinner parties at home; but, taken to excess, drink was abhorrent to him.

His diary entry for 11 June, a Saturday: 'Town by 7. Finished up *Makambo* matters and took letters on board. Gave clock to Mrs Ross to give to Dr Hoggarth for the Vila Hospital. Mrs Ayton is on board going to Epi to clear up their affairs and then she is going to take charge at Tongoa for us.' Graham Kerr had great admiration for the hospital on Iririki run by the Presbyterian Mission and particularly for Dr Hoggarth so the clock would have been to show his appreciation.



Photo 19: William James Ayton probably sometime after 1914 when he had married Alexina (née Cronstedt). (Photo and caption information are provided by Suzanne Ellis, great granddaughter of Axel and Esther Cronstedt.)



Photo 18: Alexina Jean Sarginson (née Cronstedt) and John Mawson Sarginson c.1907. (Photo and caption provided by Suzanne Ellis, great granddaughter of Axel and Esther Cronstedt.) (Sarginson appears in *Kerr Brothers Book 1*.)

As regards Mrs Alexina Ayton, her husband Will Ayton, who had visited Kermadec in January, died in Queensland on 15 March 1921. Mrs Ayton, sixth child of Axel and Esther Cronstedt, had married, firstly John Mawson Sarginson who died in 1914. She then married William James Ayton and they went to Mapuna where he managed that plantation for the Hagens. Like the Kerrs, Ayton was a New Zealander, and he had come to the New Hebrides in 1902 to work for them. The two Sarginsons, back from the Boer War, arrived from England at the same time, also to work for them, so the connection with the Kerr family was close.

Graham Kerr had been seeking unsuccessfully for somebody to take over the Kerr store on Tongoa Island, when his brother-in-law Lou Else left for reasons of ill-health. Tongoa is where the Cronstedts lived and thus Mrs Ayton knew the place well. She was on her way back from Queensland to fix up family matters on Mapuna when Graham Kerr offered her the job of managing the Kerr Store which she accepted. He appreciated the efficient way his sisters, particularly Agnes, managed the financial affairs of Kerr Bros and would later have great admiration for the management skills of Mrs Everard Fox also at Tongoa.

The death of Will Ayton was also the subject of a letter in early June from Les Mitchell to his uncle Dolph Zeitler:

It is awfully sad about poor old Ayton. He was one of the best and it is hard lines on his wife ... Mrs Ayton is coming down by next *Makambo*.¹⁰

Mid June and early July ushered in a period of dreadful weather. At least three vessels foundered off the coast of New South Wales including the *Fitzroy* with 31 people drowned. 'The *Fitzroy* seems to have been a *Tathra* affair over again' wrote Graham Kerr. I feel the family tragedy on the *Tathra* was never far from his mind. *Pacifique* was to have left for the Islands on 2 July with Agnes as a passenger on another of her periodic visits but was held back because of the wild weather.

It was certainly a prolonged spell because, on 7 August, *Makambo* which had been sheltering at Lord Howe Island arrived late in Sydney. On board she carried 100 tons copra for the Kerrs, so business was booming.

As usual each year following the annual Synod of the New Hebrides Mission—this year at Tanago—and the publication of its minutes on 20 September 1921, tempers were raised to flash point.¹¹ Graham Kerr thought points of view other than those of the Synod should be given equal prominence. 'With nearly 30 years experience in the Group, what a pity to see the extravagant abuse of all things French which is the usual feature of Presbyterian Mission reports, accepted without comment.'¹² Why did Australia take such a narrow view?

We all know that the Condominium is a failure, nearly as ghastly a failure as was the Presbyterian rule before the advent of the Condominium. Instead of encouraging British settlement in those days we were all beyond the pale and, as far as the NMH was concerned, were not wanted. Meantime French settlement went ahead battling against great difficulties and proved that cotton and cocoa could be grown profitably. It was mostly the French who made the main settlements in the Group fit for the white man to live in. Certainly the old British settlers did their share but to a lesser degree. They were not wanted by the Presbyterian Mission and received no encouragement from any British Administrator. Today French interests vastly preponderate, grave abuses for the most part distorted.

Certain labour recruiting regulations were arranged under the Joint control, these however did not suit the New Hebrides Mission which used its influence with the Colonial Office to have them altered. The result—we work under one set of regulations and the French under another, instead of the Joint regulations originally arranged.¹³

About the French keeping native woman on plantations for prostitution this is untrue. Possibly there are isolated cases of individual abuse but in general the New Hebrides Mission report is ridiculous. Illegal recruiting is very rare and it must not be forgotten the French are recruiting under different regulations to the British. Concerning prolonging native engagements, it does not pay—if a plantation gets a bad name by retaining labour after their engagement expires—they will not be able to get labour at all. There are always some natives who won't return to their own island—also there are others who stay from choice and are free to go when they desire but prefer the regular life on a plantation. Regular food, regular work and better health is preferable to loafing round on a Mission station. Maybe the Mission may be able to point out solitary cases of abuse but in what community do you not find abuse?

We ask for these Mission reports to be taken with a grain of salt. Let us work to end the Condominium. France has by far greater rights than we have, looked at from every point of view. It would be no further menace to Australia, even looking on France as a potential enemy. She already has New Caledonia close to our shores. We must have some neighbours. In this case why not France?¹⁴

Unlike insular Anglo-Saxon-Celt Australians, New Zealand-born Graham Kerr had lived since the age of 21 in New Hebrides amongst Frenchmen, Germans, Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians and got on well with most of them. Most of the not unreasonable arguments brought up in his *Sydney Morning Herald* letter

had been aired by others beside himself and, if a referendum had been held as to the opinions expressed, just about every settler in the Hebrides would have agreed. Merton King mentioned on several occasions how much the New Hebrides Mission was resented by both British and French settlers and he was by no means a fanatic. But Australian Officialdom did not want to hear. Reason was not to name of the game.

Graham Kerr was also struggling against a sudden attack of malaria late in September but work must go on. He put his wife and Joyce on a train at Hornsby to go and visit her sister Essie at Taree—now back from the New Hebrides with her husband Lou Else. By late November he, with Tom Poleman and two other men, did the physical work of getting more than 19 tons of cocoa down to the wharf to go to Melbourne on board *Monara* before he had to leave on business for Byron Bay. He was going there to sign up James Johnston who had earlier worked for the family in the New Hebrides to go to Turtle Bay to relieve Hugh Kerr, the only family member now permanently in the New Hebrides.

With the death in 1912 of Jim Kerr who had, I think, a more restrained temperament than his younger brothers, the Kerr family had suffered an incalculable loss. Jim's widow, Hannah, now lived in Sydney with her two children Walter and Bess. Walter now fourteen would be trained as an accountant and, as a side-line, would do the firm's books but otherwise lead a separate life. Thelma Bell, daughter of William Lockhart Bell, was working with Mary Kerr in the office in Graham Kerr's absence and Agnes was away on the job in the New Hebrides. Kerr Bros. Ltd at that stage was still just a family affair with Graham Kerr in the unfortunate position of having to make the decisions by himself.

Johnston left on *Pacifique* on 22 December for Turtle Bay. Also on board was Mrs Neilly, on her way to Epi who, after that, would go across to Tongoa to join Mrs Ayton.¹⁵

On 29 December Graham Kerr went to town early 'Got Tom to come in and we got all ready to leave 365 Kent St', where Kerr Bros had a storeroom for incoming produce from the New Hebrides. Two wagons arrived and by late afternoon all was stored at a new store room in Wynyard Lane. Gradually were things coming together in Sydney for Kerr Bros. Ltd, Island Merchants.

The year ended with a party for the children on New Year's Day. 'In the evening, we had about 12 "grown-ups" to tea and cards and dancing'—just another of my father's passions. After all it was now the dance-mad Roaring Twenties.

What was happening in the Condominium of New Hebrides during 1921?

There were many changes in appointments. On 6 February the French Judge, M. Mabilie, requested leave for medical reasons after being six years in the position. The British Judge, Herbert O'Reilly, had retired because of ill health in 1920. On 15 June Wilson Le Couteur retired from his job as Interpreter and Translator to the Joint Court also because of ill health.

Then Jacques Miramende, French Resident Commissioner, retired on 14 September. Merton King who had very good relations with him was very sorry to see him go. He had held the position for longer than any other French Resident. Until the arrival of his successor M. Boisiven in October Lucien Nielly, Chancellor of the French Residency, would act in his place. In fact Miramende's successor turned out to be M. D'Arboussier.

Jules Repiquet, Governor of New Caledonia and French High Commissioner, told his British Colleague Sir Cecil Rodwell that he was back from leave at the beginning of January. Rodwell himself went on leave in June 1921. Merton King seemed to be the only member of the Condominium Government to stay put.

The problem of the Joint Court or lack of the Joint Court loomed large. On 14 January 1921 King forwarded an application from J. de Leener to leave for Australia and stay there pending the re-opening of the Court, to which he was acting Public Prosecutor.¹⁶ Neither King nor Miramende had any objections. After de Leener and the French Judge, M. Mabilie, went on leave in mid-March the Joint Court staff consisted of one clerk, the bailiff, the door keeper and two messengers.

During this prolonged period of inactivity, these people still had to be paid while the settlers, who paid the taxes to provide the money in the first place, were seeing nothing for their outlay. This explains Graham Kerr's outburst earlier in this chapter about the lack of medical service in the north of the Group.

Meantime Count Buena de Esperanza, President of the Joint Court, was still in Europe. Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State Colonial Office, in a confidential despatch to the Western Pacific High

Commissioner on 25 February 1921, stressed the importance of reconstituting the Joint Court at once to do the job it was set up to do or get rid of the Condominium Government:

A jurisdiction that does not work and actually exists merely on paper, is anarchy.¹⁷

At least before the Condominium was set up in 1906 the Joint Naval Commission was there.

Esperanza had said that he needed 'well-defined instructions which [would] enable me to really exercise the functions I am invested with'. The French government was being asked its views but no reply was forthcoming. They did not want the Joint Court to deal with land claims and had always favoured the Joint Naval Commission being given the job. Procrastination was the name of the game.

King in a letter to the Commissioner on 20 October wrote that land claims work was suspended in 1913 'at the instance of the French Government prompted, it is well known, by the SFNH [*Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides*] ... the work now suspended for seven years ... But for this suspension it might now have been well on the way towards completion'. King thought that the French Government might suggest further delay:

It is said that the financial condition of the *Société* is such that it would be unable to pay the comparatively large sum that would be required as fees to the Joint Court on the applications for registration of its many claims.¹⁸

The *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* even when it was still *Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CCNH) always seemed to be in financial difficulties and nobody really knew its standing versus the French Government. I think ordinary French settlers were also kept in the dark.

On 6 September the Secretary of State Colonial Office ratified the Protocol of 1914, signed in London on 6 August 1914 and then shelved because of the First World War.¹⁹ The Protocol modified the terms of the original Anglo-French Convention of 20 October 1906. The French were in no hurry to ratify it. The Western Pacific High Commissioner was to tell Merton King the appropriate steps to take in his discussions with the French Resident. Finance was at the back of his worries:

What effect [ratification] is likely to have on the financial position of the Condominium. No funds can be provided for purchase of lands of SFNH.

And when it was ratified, many new services would be required such as professional surveyors to deal with each claim, and the appointment of District Agents to name a few. All of this meant new salaries.

It seems that Higginson's land claims were still up for grabs.²⁰ The idea that England or Australia should buy out the French was still being touted; and if the French did ratify the Protocol it would also mean that another British Judge would have to be appointed and, because of the present meagre salary, paid in francs, there were no takers.

In fact the whole salary question was causing much concern. Esperanza would not return until the question was dealt with and he was in any case past the age of retirement. Then there was Dr Borgesium who was originally appointed Native Advocate in which position he incurred the dislike of the French. He became Public Prosecutor to follow Count d'Andino in 1914, then acting President before going on leave in 1920. Neither King nor Miramende thought Borgesium should return to the New Hebrides in any capacity.²¹ They thought that de Leener although not a lawyer was well qualified for the post of Prosecutor and besides, his 'appointment would save the cost of transport of a new man'. The Western Pacific High Commissioner on 24 September warned the Secretary of State Colonial Office of the 'very strong feelings amongst settlers of both nationalities as to the financial burden caused by the maintenance of the Joint Court in its present state'.²²

On 26 September King in a confidential despatch to the Western Pacific High Commissioner regarding a revised scale of salaries for members of the Joint Court, went further:

If the two Governments propose to largely increase the salaries of those officials and leave the court in a state of suspended animation, I fear that a violent expression of feeling will be provoked.

Earlier on 13 September King sent Rodwell the Estimates for 1922 which he and Miramende had prepared:

It is satisfactory to be able record that the equilibrium established in 1921 has been maintained. No financial assistance will be required from the two Governments [but,] if the new salary scale for members of the Joint Court is acted on, things will be different and very difficult to arrange between the two Governments.²³

On 19 May the British Consul to New Caledonia, T.D. Dunlop, presented a report to the Foreign Office about the situation in New Caledonia which he represented as dirty and neglected. The most important firm was *Ballande et Fils*; its Noumea manager was called the 'Governor of New Caledonia'.

During the War the *Messageries Maritimes* steamer from Marseilles to Noumea had been discontinued, meaning that Noumea had to deal directly with Sydney for supplies, and, with a depreciated franc Noumea had to deal in sterling which embittered local feelings against Australia. Transportation of convicts had ceased in 1894, and there was a great lack of cheap labour. *Ballande et Fils* was closing down its nickel-smelting works and *Société Le Nickel* might have to cease smelting at Thio.

There was a small supply of indentured Javanese and Tonkinese labour. The best workers were the Japanese largely employed in the mines and the local fishing and market gardening was largely controlled by them. The local newspaper, *La France Australe* which also circulated in New Hebrides was anti-British and anti-Condominium.

Dunlop suggested that the local population was definitely hostile to Australia and anti-British to a lesser degree. He was not the only one to make this observation and it was understandable, as Australia—stridently anti-French—was not a party to the Anglo-French Agreement.²⁴ What Australia would have thought of the Javanese, Tonkinese and particularly the Japanese being given house-room in New Caledonia would have added to the hostility.

France was suffering. On 7 February King had told Rodwell that the French Government had imposed taxation on settlers other than those in the French official regime in the New Hebrides. The French Resident had told King on 22 March that the step was taken in consequence of an annual grant for the maintenance of the national establishment being considerably reduced by the Government of the Republic. He had received instructions to make up the deficit in his budget from local resources. This was contrary to Joint Regulation No 11 of 1920.²⁵

From an article published in *La France Australe* 29 November it seemed that the French were working on a solution to their problem. An alliance of the French Pacific colonies with the French colony of Indo-China was mooted. The newspaper saw a bright future for New Caledonia and New Hebrides in their attachment to the rich colony of Indo-China. Also the piaster, the currency of Indo-China, not devalued like the franc, would off-set the sterling. Shipping was to be stepped up connecting all the French Pacific colonies. These suggestions were to be put to the Minister for Colonies in France.²⁶ My father would have heard this discussed among his French friends and, with all the frustrations endured as a British subject, ideas were slowly forming in his mind that here too might be a solution to his problems.

Endnotes

- 1 WPHC 2143/1921, King to WPH Commissioner 21 July 1921 stating that the French Government has appointed a medical officer to attend to French settlers on Santo
- 2 WPHC 1170/1921.
- 3 See PBM No 1091, Tiby Hagen to Dolph Zeitler 3 Jan 1921.
- 4 Early in the century the young Kerr brothers had an office near Circular Quay, not far from Julian Ashton's Studio. There they made the acquaintance of Ashton's two sons, Roy Arthur and Percy who took up land for some time on Efate. Roy was killed in action in the First World War. Through this connection the Kerrs also met the young Elioth Gruner who was for some time on the Turtle Bay Plantation.
- 5 On 17 Jan 1921 my father wrote in his diary that the woman who did the washing for my mother at Kermadec was shot by her husband, not fatally, and he had then shot himself, so life at our family home was also not without its drama.
- 6 The following quotation is the caption under a photograph of the vessel taken by J Davis which is held in the Maritime Museum in Hobart '*Lunawanna* built by Purdon & Featherstone in 1911 for J. Sward and generally considered to have been one of the finest models of a barge ever built. Length 57 feet, 3 ins. Beam 16 feet 6 ins. Depth 5 feet. Note the gilded rooster at the main mast head. She was obviously 'Cock of the Derwent' at the time, dating the photo at between 1916 and 1918. Note also the centre board is up while sailing downwind'.
- 7 Her Vysuck property was still in dispute with the British Treasury trying to settle the matter. The last communication had been 5 Oct 1917. 'The estate which forms the subject of the offer made by Mr G.L.S. Kerr as Attorney for Miss Petersen is that known as the "Annie Petersen" Estate of which an area of rather more than one acre was taken over by the Condominium Government for the erection of the Post Office and Treasury while the cottage referred to as standing on the eastern boundary of the land was similarly taken over by the Condominium Government for the reason that the house had been assigned as a residence for the Registrar of the Joint Court. The sum of 1152 [pounds] which has been so far paid to the Vendors was accordingly allocated to British and Joint Accounts ... Merton King thought that if the Kerrs would refund about 860 pounds in respect of the land [not used] the Treasury should accept it but did not think they would agree to that sum.' The WPH Commissioner was asked by the Secretary of State Colonial Office to find out precisely the sum they would accept and, had the Joint Court yet adjudicated on the title see WPHC 3273/1917.
- 8 D.H. Lawrence wrote the novel *Kangaroo* (publ. 1923) partly set in the Sydney of this time and writes of the kind of political situation that Graham Kerr here describes (ed.)
- 9 WPHC 569/1921.
- 10 See PMB No. 1091, Zeitler A. Corres etc 1899–1935.
- 11 WPHC 2998/1921, Enclosure in New Hebrides despatch No. 175, 28 Sept 1921. Macmillan to Merton King 20 September 1921, King's comment on this Minute: 'I have no remarks to make on the document save that the statements contained in it are marked by the usual vagueness and exaggeration.'
- 12 See SMH sometime after 18 Oct 1921? I have my father's typed copy of letter with no date.
- 13 I feel that the dreadful reputation of all British settlers in the New Hebrides, which persists to this day in some quarters, can be traced to stories put out by the New Hebrides Mission who did not want them there. In some cases, if a settler received an official posting, he too took it out on his ordinary British fellows, so the opinion had become deeply ingrained, much to the resentment of the people so unfairly tarred.
- 14 This rose out of a deputation from the Presbyterian Church to W.M. Hughes who referred it to the Governor General 27 Nov 1920. When asked for his opinion, Merton King 12 April: wrote regarding the morals of the group: 'I do not think that the morals of the people are more endangered by life on French plantations than by on the British ... except in so far as more women are employed by the French'. This is when King also wrote: 'I have it on good authority that the British settlers would prefer French annexation to British, as they fear the latter would mean cession to Australia'. See WPHC 3169/ 1920.
- 15 Ella Esther Neilly 1888–1973, née Cronstedt was a younger sister of Mrs Ayton. She married Lucien Nielly, a French Condominium official and divorced him in 1914 for adultery, then altered the spelling of her surname to Neilly.
- 16 WPHC 500/1921, King to WPH Commissioner 14 Jan 1921.
- 17 WPHC 1087/1921.
- 18 WPHC 2996/1921.
- 19 WPHC 1836/1921.
- 20 A conference took place in London 8 July 1921 in which the future of the New Hebrides was discussed with the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand. W.M. Hughes made what was in effect an offer to buy out the SFNH which appeared to interest the British Government, everything else being equal, which of course it was not. France would never have agreed and England really wanted no part of it. See WPHC 116/1921. See also WPHC 319/1922. Secret, Secretary of State C.O. to WPH Commissioner 25 Nov 1921 regarding proposed sale of lands
- 21 Borgesius had been involved in a scandal concerning a lady of French birth but a British subject by marriage. See WPHC 2738/1921, King to WPH Commissioner, 26 Sept 1921.
- 22 WPHC 2261A/1921.
- 23 WPHC 2992/1921.
- 24 WPHC 2242/1921, Winston Churchill to Rodwell 18 July 1921 enclosing letter T.D. Dunlop to Foreign Office 19 May 1921.
- 25 WPHC 572/1921.
- 26 WPHC 81/1923, includes two articles on the matter, one *La France Australe* 29 Nov 1921; another from *Le Bulletin de Commerce* 23 Feb 1923.

Chapter 4 1922: British/French Relations

Very Tense – Partition not Possible

1922 would be a very different year for my father; nine months of it spent in the New Hebrides while D.H. Kerr was in Sydney. The death of Jim Kerr in 1912 had meant that there were only two brothers to run a family business that was expanding all the time and located in widely separated places. An attempt to remedy the situation with another member of the family had failed following the tragic deaths of Bella and Jack Webb the previous year.

Pacifique arrived in Sydney on 15 January with Agnes Kerr on board. Graham Kerr was very anxious to question her about ‘wild rumours’ that *Lunawanna* had been lost in a hurricane. Not so: ‘she was driven ashore but was practically undamaged’. This we will find was not quite true.¹

Merton King notified the Western Pacific High Commissioner on 2 March that a ‘heavy gale struck the small islands of Tongoa and Emai on 3 February and caused much damage to buildings and crops’.² He later visited both Tongoa and Epi on board *Euphrosyne* reporting that the house of Mrs Neill a British settler on Epi had been unroofed.

As the Kerrs had a store on Tongoa Graham Kerr would have wanted to know how it had fared too. He left Sydney on *Pacifique* on 23 March from Wharf No. 7 Woolloomooloo. Richard My—who was helping out in the Sydney office—accompanied by my sister Joyce aged almost 9 saw him off. My father always liked some of the family to farewell him and through the years we must have seen him off from nearly every wharf in Sydney. Amongst the passengers were Messrs Austin, De Leener, Mrs Thomas Johnston³, Julius Petersen and daughter and others—all well known to my father.

He was glad to leave Noumea, the first port of call: ‘It is like a decaying city’. They reached Vila on 21 March. ‘Pango Point has now a flashing light on it which is a boon to shipping entering’. Something, at least, was going ahead.

Graham Kerr called on Merton King the next day who told him about the damage caused by the hurricane. He then left for the north still on board *Pacifique*. At Naturel’s place at Epi he heard from Mr Hill who worked for Roxburgh more about the ‘bad blow’ at Tongoa in February. ‘Mr Michelsen’s place was blown down entirely, our house was damaged and copra shed blown down’. Graham Kerr would have been worried because Mrs Ayton was now managing the store on Tongoa and he gave Hill a letter for her before *Pacifique* left on its trip north.

Pacifique reached Second Channel on 24 March. Here Hugh Kerr and his wife boarded the vessel on their way to Sydney. Graham Kerr was to take over at Turtle Bay. No launch came down from Turtle Bay to collect him so he spent the night on the Rubber Company’s craft, Mr Aldington in charge. ‘I am getting on to Turtle Bay by Julius Petersen’s craft but she is not leaving till morning.’

While at Second Channel Graham Kerr went to see the Director of Ballandes there, M. Bonneaud, and ‘offered our New Hebrides property to [Ballandes]’. This seems like a bolt from the blue to rid the firm of its assets in the Group and run the business as a Merchant Firm only from Sydney, but the idea had been in the minds of the two brothers for a long time. Some family member was needed to manage the plantation full time. Graham Kerr and his brother did not see eye to eye on management. Hugh Kerr was more interested in running *Lunawanna* and recruiting, than plantation and store management.



Photo 20: Tongoa about 1922. Back row left to right Mrs Michelsen, Reverend Michelsen, Mrs Newman, Mr Newman and Ella Neilly; middle row Alexina Ayton, Olive Newman, Oscar Newman; and front row Thora Newman, John Ayton and Maurice Neilly. (Photo and caption provided by Suzanne Ellis, great granddaughter of Axel and Esther Cronstedt.)

Hugh thought that his brother had it much easier in Sydney than in the New Hebrides, but having no children himself it was easier for him and his wife—who had lost her only child in childbirth in February 1917—to run that part of the business. Graham Kerr had my mother and his four daughters who needed schooling to consider.

Since the loss of the *Tathra* in 1912 and the drowning of her 16 month-old daughter, followed in 1915 by the death (still-born) of her son in Vila, my mother had lost her taste for island life. In fact she never returned to the New Hebrides after leaving in 1918. Graham Kerr hated the heat and was increasingly dissatisfied with the lot of British settlers under Condominium rule, including their inability to get enough labour.

The prestigious firm of Ballandes had a permanent seat on the board of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris and such a good offer would not be ignored. Hugh Kerr thought that:

Ballandes would do anything to get our business at Turtle Bay and would like to get the Vila property ... Our property is good value for money ... Vila property is always saleable on account of its position.⁴

Graham Kerr arrived at Turtle Bay on 24 March where James Johnston was now running things on his own. Next day he took a boat down to Mate Wulu Plantation to fetch his personal luggage. Normally the launch or *White Heather* would have picked him up at Segond Channel but they were both out of commission. On the way back from Mate Wulu he called in at Diamond Island to see Kabota, the boat builder, and as bad weather was threatening decided that *White Heather* needed securing and ‘with all hands got her pulled into the shed’.⁵ Aldington in the Banks Company’s vessel ‘brought our things from Segond Channel—cargo ex *Pacifique*’.⁶

Graham Kerr found that a ‘good many labour were sick with the continual wet weather, James Johnston doctoring them’. He then went back to Diamond Island to see how Kabota was getting on with repairs to *Lunawanna*. Kabota had finished coppering her hull and was making a new rudder. ‘Champion is overhauling the rigging.’⁷ He opened the store at the plantation in the afternoon of

1 April and 'had a very busy time after paying out to Labour'—but he probably received most of the money back in purchases.

 Ghastly hot wet hurricane weather, glass down, ugly-looking ... Fysh from Big Bay called in with his launch in the early afternoon and had some lunch with [us].

The weather was worse the next day. Aldington, lending a hand down at the Island, started *Lunawanna's* engine but then had to return to his own vessel which was sheltering there—'barometer down to 29-30. Cannot work the labour outside in this weather'. By 7 April the glass had fallen to 29-20—'raining all the time but not much wind'. The threatened hurricane did not arrive and the weather improved so Graham Kerr 'could set the boys cleaning up the mess round the plantation and getting the boat shed to rights'. He could not bear mess.

'Fysh called in on his way back from Second Channel. La Chaise⁸ called in with [his] vessel for some rice [from the store]. Fysh is staying for the night.' He and Kerr had a game of cards in the evening and in the morning Fysh cut Graham Kerr's hair before leaving. I wonder what sort of hair dresser he was. I have seen photos of my father very wild and woolly so perhaps any cut would have been an improvement.

By 14 April the weather was bad again and Johnston was down with malaria and by 19 April had some very bad attacks. Graham Kerr too was suffering. He needed to go to Second Channel to meet the *Pacifique* and went down in Julius Petersen's vessel on 20 April only to find the *Pacifique* was delayed. She did not arrive until 26 April and by then he was very ill. However in heavy rain he went alongside and collected our cargo and took it back to the anchorage. He then went off again and finished his mail for Sydney on board, before getting another bad attack of fever. He lay down for a while and then went ashore where he lay on his bunk on the Banks Company vessel. Next day he left for Turtle Bay on Julius Petersen's craft. 'Fine weather at last.'

He found that Johnston had not recovered and next day when he himself went to Diamond Island he too succumbed to another bad attack. As both *White Heather* and *Lunawanna* were out of commission the cargo ex *Pacifique* had to come up by boat and dray. By 30 April he was 'very washed out' but fortunately Johnston was a little better.

Raymond Gardel had come to see him on 28 April and he arranged for Gardel to work at Turtle Bay for a certain number of hours a month, all found, while there.⁹ On 1 May he went down to Mate Wulu where the *Pervenche*, belonging to *Société de Béchade*, was at anchor to find out when she would be leaving for Vila. When *Lunawanna* was ready to go out, Kerr had to return.

But he needed also to see how things were going at Tongoa. *Pervenche* came up to Turtle Bay to deliver items borrowed by Robert Petersen. Graham Kerr then left, having arranged that 'Gardel [come] up to-day so Johnston will not be alone'. Neither of them was yet over their malaria attacks. *Pervenche* anchored at Robert Petersen's place at Aisse over-night and next day left for Aoba.

 Anchored at Peter Pentecost's early in the morning. Later in the day we went on to Duindui. *Pervenche* is taking on copra and cotton. Remained there for the night. Splendid weather.

They called at several places on Aoba and on 5 May were at Lombaha. Next day they reached Nordvi's anchorage soon after daylight:

 French warship *Aldebaran* here. They are picking up some hostages—chiefs—in connection with the murder of Freudenreich on the weather side of Aoba some months ago. They expect by taking away several Chiefs that the murderer or murderers will be given up.¹⁰

They remained overnight and Graham Kerr went 'ashore and had a look at Nordvi's (our) place. The buildings (of very little value) have fallen down'. When George Nordvi, a Norwegian, died circa 1916, the Kerrs bought his property. By 7 May they were at Loltong, Pentecost:

This place suffered severely in the blow in April and there is very little green vegetation left.

The next stopping place was Port Sandwich where they remained for two days while *Pervenche* took on coal. With time on his hands—a most unusual event—Graham Kerr amused himself ‘studying cacao planting, oil engines and General History’. To my knowledge he rarely sat still long enough to read anything except the newspaper. Next stop was Sasun Bay further north on the coast of Malekula, then on to Paama.

Anchored at Tahi. Went ashore to have a look at our place. Ruins mostly. Zeitler and Hagen are supposed to be looking after the place, but apparently are leaving it without any attention. Putting Willie Paama—a teacher—in charge. He is to fence it and make a garden and look after [it] with the right to make his garden and take coconuts.

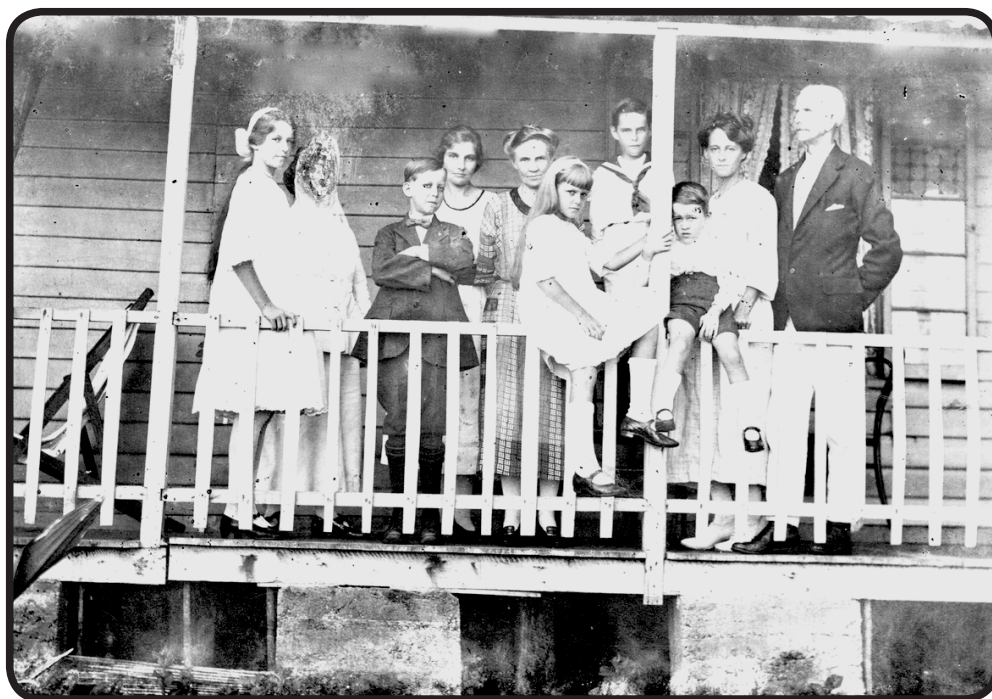


Photo 21: Tonga about 1922 same day as previous Tonga photo. Left to right Olive Newman, unknown woman, Oscar Newman, Ella Neilly, Alexina Ayton, Thora Newman, Maurice Neilly, John Ayton, Mrs Newman (née Alba Hargraves, Newman's third wife) and Mr (J.F.) Newman. (Photo and caption provided by Suzanne Ellis, great granddaughter of Axel and Esther Cronstedt.)

When the ship reached Ringdove Bay next day my father left a letter regarding the Paama property for Zeitler and Hagen. They reached Tonga on 12 May:

Went ashore at our place. Mrs Ayton and Mrs Neilly and children all well. The house had a bad doing in the blow in February and the copra shed was blown down altogether. Michelsen and Newman suffered worse still, their places being entirely blown down—everything. Our store stood alright but end was blown out of the house. Mrs Ayton got a native carpenter to repair the place. He made a very good ... patch job. The place really wants a new roof, the iron is so rusted and what was blown off could not stand replacing ... Noting down what wants doing, and attending to several book (account) matters.

Undine Bay, Efate, was next port-of-call and by 14 May they were at Havannah Harbour where Graham Kerr went ashore to have a look at Captain Macleod's old place. Back in Vila he put up at Hotel Moderne and visited Emile My who now lived in our old house up behind what had once been

Kerr Bros Vila store before being leased to the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles Hébrides* [CCNH] and managed by Emile.

Graham Kerr's offer to sell our assets in the New Hebrides to Ballandes must have reached the right ears because on 16 May he:

went up to see a high French official sent out here to report to the French government on the New Hebrides. He sent word that he would like to see me, so I went up to the French Judge's house with Mr My to see him. Spoke of New Hebrides matters, Australian opinion re the New Hebrides, British settler's opinion, steam services etc. He seemed a nice fellow and very alert and clear.

This man was Charles Revel, French Inspector General of Colonies, and what my father had to offer was significant. When the French warship, *Aldebaran*, left for Noumea with Revel on board my father sent mail for Sydney.

He had a very busy time in Vila obtaining recruiting and carrying licences from Merton King and paying Custom's dues. He also saw Mr Wallace about land at the back of Turtle Bay plantation belonging to Matt Wells which Kerr Bros had arranged to buy from him for 440 pounds.¹¹ Wallace was the family lawyer and a legal transfer had to be drawn up.

My father managed some social functions, such as dinner at the Club with Mr My. 'Bridge until after midnight.' On Saturday 20 May he was sorting things belonging to Kerr Bros that were still in their old store. He thought some of the items would be of use in the Turtle Bay store.

Went to Fete up at the French Residency in the afternoon—something in connection with French fallen soldiers. In the evening there was a Ball at Ohlens which ended up about 3am with a fight. Two French larrikins resented British people taking part and, as Mrs Newman had been asked by some French people to play a waltz, these larrikins put on a gramophone record and yelled at the piano to stop. I could see there was going to be trouble so took Mrs Newman away. All the better class French people immediately left too.

British/French relations were tense—sometimes sparked off by French larrikins, sometimes by British ones. For the French, the trauma of having their homeland occupied by the Germans during the recent war, and also earlier by Bismarck in 1870—something that England was spared—went very deep.

While in Vila Graham Kerr obtained a licence for *Lunawanna* to recruit 200 labourers and went to the Joint court to check documentation of Nordvi's land bought by Kerrs after his death. He also fitted in a visit to 'Pango ... to see our little place there'.¹²

On 23 May, *Dawn*, belonging to the Rubber Company in the Banks Group, with Mr and Mrs Hawkesby and Mr and Mrs Nicholson on board arrived in Vila. Mrs Nicholson who had had a baby three weeks previously was very ill; in fact she died in hospital a few hours after they arrived. My father attended her funeral. He had known Joe Hawkesby, a fellow New Zealander for many years. Hawkesby had been a crew member of *Countess of Ranfurly* back in 1910.

Graham Kerr was now waiting for *Pacifique* to arrive from Noumea, his business in Vila for the moment up to date. He took his good friends M. and Mme. My and their assistant Miss Gardel to dinner on *Pacifique* before it left for the north. He enjoyed being hospitable. When the ship reached Diamond Bay, Epi, Naturel's plantation, Mrs Ayton, over from Tongoa with Mr Hill from Roxburgh's, came on board with her daughter Gretta whom she was sending to school in Sydney.

When they reached Turtle Bay on 29 May, which the *Pacifique* visited every second trip, my father remarked:

... the new Captain on *Pacifique* [was] very careful going in, working cargo ashore and copra off... knocked off work for the night at 6.30. Johnston and I had dinner on Board. Raining heavily.

67 tons of copra had been loaded by 10 am next morning. Kerr hastily finished off mail before the ship left on its return trip.

Next thing was to see how repairs to *Lunawanna* had progressed, so he went to the Island in a small boat. Launching was the next step. 'Kabota got 20 boys from the plantation this morning preparing for launching'. When Graham Kerr came back in the afternoon 'Kabota [had] 40 boys ... 10 working and 30 looking on'. But launching was difficult. 'Kabota is an awful messer as far as launching a ship is concerned.' *Lunawanna* was a 24 ton auxiliary ketch and apparently Kabota was using soft wood runners. On 2 June Graham Kerr and Gardel, who was also lending a hand, went with 4 boys to cut hardwood runners on the plantation. Finally on 4 June, with the help of 30 boys, Gardel and Whitford, *Lunawanna* was afloat at high tide.

Next day Graham Kerr 'had all the labour before me in the morning to get proper trace of them and their time, and re a boats-crew for *Lunawanna*'. He wanted to get her on the job as soon as possible; Walter Champion and Frank Whitford were in charge but there was much still to do. It would take several weeks work before she could put to sea. Hugh Kerr wrote to his brother on 10 April from Sydney:

Should there be any trouble about running the vessel, I should have to return and run her myself. We must keep a reasonable supply of labour or plantation would go back.

So dire was the labour problem, he added, that Auguste Lançon was 'going to China to get Labour. If a few more did the same it should relieve the situation'. Apparently, as Lançon never sent his local labour home on time, they refused to reengage.

The labour at Turtle Bay—who had missed out on its usual holiday while working on *Lunawanna*—was given a holiday for most of Friday 9 June and the next day. The store was opened in the morning for those on holiday. 'A busy afternoon in the store with the labour. We paid copra bonuses to the end of May.' Graham Kerr decided that a good clean-up round the plantation was necessary:

As it is looking like rain again we turned all the labour we could spare from regular jobs (including the women)¹³. They were burning off coconut husks and other rubbish that had accumulated. Johnston, Gardel and myself superintending and helping.

Necessary plantation management had got behind. Graham Kerr wrote up the price book for the store and he and Johnston brought the Labour Register book up to date from November last:

Johnston calling out from small book entered each day, showing the different jobs, labour employed ... sick time etc. Slow work writing up for over 100 labour. Johnston is keeping the Register written up now but it got behind before ... We will get it up to date by going at it for a few afternoons.

On 12 June:

Hawkesby called in at dark with the *Dawn* and anchored. Went off. Found him absolutely stupid with drink. He is returning some benzene we lent him ... Tried to get [him] to stay until tomorrow to sober up but he left for the Banks.

In between bringing the books up to date, cleaning up, and seeing how the *Lunawanna* repairs were going, on 16 June Graham Kerr 'started making a road up the hill in the afternoon (4 boys)'. This continued next day until 10am when he 'had all the labour in at 11am and instituted a clean-up in their village—not before it was wanted. Johnston and I inspected their houses—some of them are very bad. Opened up the store in the afternoon and did good business'.

Amongst his other occupations Kerr was also a horse-breaker.

[He] went down and got on [Julius] Petersen's horse. He sent him up for me to quieten him. No one down there can get on him—he is an outlaw. They have just spoilt him and he knows they are afraid of him. I took him into the water and got on him bare back. He bucked round for a bit but couldn't do much. Afterwards I went for a ride on him. Went along to the small river in the afternoon to fish but Gardel had already got a lot of fine Picot with a charge of dynamite so I didn't try the line.

Breaking in Petersen's horse, burning up plantation rubbish, road building as well as a few boys working on clearing a paddock for very necessary new planting went on apace as well as house repairs. Some of the foundation blocks of the plantation house had also gone and these too needed labour to repair them. Gardel was also putting up a new door on the store.

On 24 June Graham Kerr wrote:

Work is going on alright, but our 100 labour is all too few. Much work waits to be done. Some boys are picking, fermenting and drying cacao. A big crowd of men and women on the new ground. There are the regular copra workers. The Island and *Lunawanna* has about 10 boys. We are waiting on Kabota now to get *Lunawanna* away. He is working on the galley.

On 17 June 'Champion gave *Lunawanna* a run up the Harbour, first under engine and then under sail. She sails like a witch'. By 30 June she was at last ready and Kerr was

... up before daylight and left very early, riding down to Diamond Island. Went on board *Lunawanna* and we left immediately for Segond, calling to pick Petersen up. Went out our passage under engine, then used engine and sails ... good run down, anchoring about 11.30am.

He was anxiously awaiting the arrival of *Pacifique* with mail from Australia. She arrived on 3 July and my father was on board reading a letter from my mother when the wireless operator gave him a message as follows 'Son, thirtieth, all well'. My only brother, named Graham for his father, but called Len, had arrived on 30 June earlier than expected. With a history of family birth-mishaps my father was anxious but consoled himself. 'Must be alright or they wouldn't word it like that.'

By 4 July with cargo from *Pacifique* stowed aboard, they left for Turtle Bay, picking up Fritz Buhring at Aore on the way. He was to overhaul the launch's engine as well as making a stove pipe for *Lunawanna* and repairing her benzene engine. They were also carrying cargo for Thomas of Hog Harbour, James of Big Bay and the Banks Company.

The next job was to get accounts ready to pay off the labour due to go home on *Lunawanna*. 'Paid off 15 Malekula labour—10 men and 5 women.' There were trade goods to load on board as she was a floating store as well as a recruiting boat. Part of the cargo was a bullock and two heifers. 'D.H. promised [them] to Chief at Big Nambas, Malekula. Have to square the Chief to be able to get labour.'

Commanded by Walter Champion, *Lunawanna* left for her first recruiting trip. First stop was to be Pentecost where she had to pick up a boat 'that Cameron built for us', then on to Malekula to land the returns. At the same time Buhring and Johnston went in the launch 'down



Photo 22: Graham Lennox Stirling Kerr Junior (Len) born 30 June 1922 at Kermadec. Photo provided by Len Kerr's family (Lisa and Gary Kerr) in early 2018.

to Mavea to Naturel's craft to see to engine'. Johnston was going in order 'to pick up all he [could] re running'. One needed to be a jack-of-all-trades in the New Hebrides. Eventually Johnston would have to run the launch himself amongst his other jobs.

Meantime they had been having trouble with cattle on the plantation. Graham Kerr 'went for a ride up to the old plantation at Turtle Bay to see cattle. Got two fat bullocks to follow me through coming back'. Cattle were essential to keep the thick undergrowth from choking crops as well as providing meat. Later he went to see how the women were getting on with 'cleaning up coconuts'. Johnston and Kerr later 'rode through cacao and later through cotton'. He then drove a lot of the cattle through to the Turtle Bay end of the plantation as there was no feed left where they were and they were damaging the coconut trees. In between times my father started 'clearing up the Store [which] badly wants doing'. It was at this time that he gave a job to a Japanese called Arihé who would prove to be a skilful tradesman.

On 16 July Kerr and Buhring went down to Robert Petersen's. It seems that 'Hagens lost a vessel across near Tom Wright's and Robert is sending his vessel to Epi to take crew and recruits home. Les Hagen on board. Had breakfast at Robert's. Home by dark, leaving launch at Diamond Island'.

Turtle Bay Plantation was built round the bay which meant that Kerr had to travel from side to side to see how plantation work was progressing. By 21 July Fritz Buhring had finished his job and Johnston was to take him down to Segond in the launch and then bring it back. My father meantime:

... had a big morning. Some labour on cacao, two helping. Ariké building cacao drying frames on runners. Gave boat to some [labour] to get grass [to thatch bad houses]. All the rest ... for a general clean up.

By 22 July he had

... all stock, stores and all sheds with their contents cleaned up and in order. Put one new tank in position at cottage after tarring outside bottom well and then I had bottom inside cemented. General tool inspection this morning and have the grindstone going, sharpening up.¹⁴

On 24 July they started cotton picking with 60 odd labour on the job. 'Good dry weather and the cotton is ripening quickly'. By 26 July it had started raining and Johnston was showing signs of fever. Rainy weather often signalled the onset of malaria. Fysh called in and stayed the night. The rain had almost stopped by 29 July but the weather was unsatisfactory for cotton and cacao as it kept them damp. He ran up a temporary shelter to ferment the cacao. He was also busy with orders for goods and letters which Robert Petersen 'up for the day with his five sons' would deliver for him on *Pacifique*. On 1 August he 'rode through to Turtle Bay end to see about a bullock to kill. Drove some through. Roped the bullock in the afternoon for Arihé and the natives to kill. Busy with the books, took a heifer with her calf up top to break in for milking'. Being brought up on a dairy farm in N.Z. this part of the work would have familiar to him.

On 5 August they were inundated with visitors. Kerr too was now ill, 'hanging on in the store until dead dark, my head splitting', while Johnston looked after the visitors, Thomas, Salisbury, Baynes and a man by the name of Wellerman—a passenger from the *Pacifique*. They are staying tonight too, waiting for *Pacifique*; Johnston is not at all set out for visitors. Fixed them up the best way we could'. He received a business letter from his brother Hugh—'All must be well in Sydney or he would have said so'.

Next day Graham Kerr went down with a severe attack of fever. To complicate matters the *Makambo* also arrived. 'Johnston ... receiving cargo and shipping copra. I am having a rotten bad time. Towards evening Johnston got Dr. Davies (from Vila) who is on the *Makambo* to come ashore to see me. He gave an injection of quinine'. Business letters were finished by Johnston and he took them, and a letter my father managed to write to my mother, on board.

Johnston acted very well today during a trying time. Mr Fysh came along during the day and stayed the night. He was very good. Next day [I] had a very bad day with high

temperature. Can't get any rest—my head splitting. Arihé sleeping [here] to give a hand to look after me.

He was so bad next day, 8 August, that Johnston got the launch brought up the Bay.

However I felt a little better this morning. As the day wore on I was as bad as ever and worse in the evening ... Had an awful night [on 9 August]. No sleep whatever since Saturday night, head splitting and high fever. About the worst night I have ever put in.

Poor Johnston was so worried that he sent the launch off to Robert Petersen's to get help, thereby incurring Kerr's wrath as he could have gone down to Second Channel in it.

When Robert came I managed to walk down the hill with a rest. Got on board Robert's cutter and he ran me right down to Second Channel. Johnston and Arihé came with me but Johnston returned with Robert. Mr Chevillard of Ballandes took me in and the Doctor happened to be there so he attended to me right away. The trip down broke the fever. The Doctor gave me a sleeping draft, so I got some rest in.

If only Muriel Kerr had been there to calm him but she was in Sydney fully occupied looking after our new baby brother. Johnston was again in my father's bad books by packing the wrong things. 'Not a towel, not a hanky, no things for my teeth etc.' He remedied the situation the next day. My father usually assumed a brave face when he was sick but this attack must have been very severe. Johnston too was not well and grossly overworked, as my father told his brother later. Johnston had been hired as bookkeeper and to look after the store but, under Hugh's management, that was not considered a full-time job.

Kerr remained under the French doctor's care at Second Channel until 14 August

... when Robert came round with his bigger craft as he wants some supplies himself and he is taking two casks of wine that came by the *Pacifique* for us. I am going back with him. Left Second Channel about midday and Robert ran me right down to Turtle Bay, just three hours run. We had lunch on board. Robert is a really good chap always doing something for someone. I am rather ashamed, but we do what we can in return. Robert came up and stayed a while.

The difference between his appreciation of the efforts of Robert Petersen and those of Johnston is conspicuous. Johnston, a family friend since 1912, had no say in the provision of hospitality at Turtle Bay. This was Hugh Kerr's role and provision of such comforts was not Hugh's strong point. Robert Petersen's plantation was where Petersen lived permanently with his large family. For these isolated people hospitality was a way of life. There was no such continuity at Turtle Bay.

It was straight back to work for Graham Kerr; busy with the books. 'Have natives bottling off wine.' Be it said, not for their consumption. From a letter he wrote to the Kerr Brothers office in Sydney 9 September 1922, it seems that Kabota was mostly responsible. Wine formed the principle part of his rations. I believe that Johnston also liked a glass of wine; surely little enough alleviation to a daily grind carried out in an enervating climate that offered not much else in the way of entertainment. There are nevertheless many incidents of over-indulgence by white people in the New Hebrides.

The twenty first of August brought my mother to mind as it was her birthday. Kerr had been going to launch *White Heather* but felt so ill that he asked Walter Champion to do it. The weather was not satisfactory for cotton picking. 'Dry enough to start us picking and then suddenly comes the rain.' On 18 August *Lunawanna* had arrived back with 'only 2 returns and one new man from Malekula. Very poor trip. Johnston's name is no good in Malekula.'¹⁵ D.H. Kerr was the family member who was good at recruiting, perhaps because he was well known to the Islanders where Johnston was not. There is no doubt that Hugh had a way with them. They enjoyed his jokes which were not of the subtle variety.

Graham Kerr could not shake off the fever but work must go on. Also 29 labour were due to be sent home which meant the Labour Register had to be written up ready to pay them off, and the store open so they could make purchases. Champion was still working on *White Heather* and *Lunawanna* was being made ready. She left for the Banks Group on 27 August with 26 returns. If this recruiting trip was as bad as the first, Graham intended to take her out himself next time.

Cotton picking was still held up by the wet weather. Kabota was busy on Diamond Island with the launch. Arihé, the Japanese he had employed a month or so back, was proving himself a treasure and was also working on the Island building a kiosk.

Kabota, was not a New Hebridean. Graham Kerr 'had to put him right. He has messed up the natives terribly'. There was always tension between the Indigenous people and people of other cultures who worked with them.

Feeling sick and worried about the delayed cotton and cacao picking, Kerr was not his usual hospitable self when Salisbury, Condominium Government Agent stationed at Hog Harbour, called in 'to stay the day and night—damned nuisance'. He was out with the boys on 5 September 'using the new wagon for the first time—getting them used to the run of it'.

Then Silas (Meralav) broke part of engine in launch this morning getting her ready to run to meet the *Pacifique*. This meant that Johnston had to take the boat down to Robert Petersen's with the mail. Sending off mail plus orders for the Sydney office was always a problem. On 9 September:

Hawkesby called in on his way to the Banks. I had mail ready to send overland to Hog Harbour to catch *Makambo* but as Hawkesby is calling there, gave it to him.

Nothing seemed to be going smoothly. 'Bad weather all the time ... Showers always. Am afraid we will lose the lot—cotton and cacao'. He needed a proper drying system and knew it. Meantime he was working on the books at the store, working out prices and opening up new goods. On 13 September the *Pervenche* launch called from Mate Wulu and 'also *St Michel* to see if any business to do. Nothing'.

Graham Kerr had his 49th birthday on 21 September. 'Johnston made a special dinner in the evening.' Kerr was still suffering intermittent bouts of malaria and was now the same age as his uncle Donald Macleod when he died of malaria. But work must go on if the plantation was to be put in proper running order.

Kabota's job at Turtle Bay finished up on 5 September much to Kerr's relief and, on 27 September, de Béchade's launch called in to collect Kabota's tools. The kiosk Arihé was building on Diamond Island was finished so Kerr moved down there from the house up top which he occupied with Johnston. He was still trying to find a way of saving the cacao. 'Last two days over 8 inches.' He could not get the cacao dry. 'To help save some, I fixed up smoke house with sheets of iron and put cacao on top to dry with fire.'

By 6 October 'Johnston left with boat early to go down to Robert Petersen's to wait *Pacifique* ... He sent the boat back. Johnston was going to fetch Fritz Buhring. He returned with him on 9 October.'

On 10 October 'Buhring started work giving *White Heather's* engine overhaul. Buhring is sleeping in Kabota's house and having his meals with me. As usual Ariké was earning his keep, this time 'getting hides and old metal ready for Sydney'. Graham Kerr was thinking of selling *White Heather* because she represented too much value just lying round especially when things such as a new drying house were needed.

The kiosk, on low-lying Diamond Island, was no good for Kerr's fever so he went back 'up top to lie down. Temp 103.' *Lunawanna* came in about midday 11 October, from her second recruiting trip with one six months, and one 1-year, and one 3-year labourer. 'Poor trip. Thought they would have done better.' From a letter dated 15 October this number increased to 14.

Champion has not done much good to date. About 40 went home and we only have 18 back, Maybe D.H. will be able to get two good trips in to balance things up a bit ... This one-year business is no good.

Not surprisingly with no rest and surrounded by problems he could not solve, Graham Kerr went down with fever again. But by 15 October he was expecting the *Makambo* to arrive with Hugh on board to take over.

Copra, old metal, hides (from slaughtered cattle) and 2 sacks cotton (sample) are all ready. The new recruits signed on. D.H. is going to take *Lunawanna* down to Segond to pick up Mr My, coming by *Pacifique* tomorrow.

On 19 October *Lunawanna* was back and my father, D.H. and Emile My inspected the cacao in the afternoon. The next day Buhring brought the launch up to Turtle Bay and all three plus Julius Petersen, who had arrived for breakfast, went down in her to Mate Wulu 'and afterwards up the river between our place and Petersen's'. Accompanied by Hugh, Emile My made a thorough inspection of Turtle Bay plantation while Graham Kerr managed the Store. He was still far from well. On 22 October the three of them went across to Robert Petersen's place where Emile My was to remain until he caught *St Michel* back to Vila.

Graham Kerr paid off 10 labour on 24 October: 'Busy in the store selling to them. *Pervenche* came in afternoon. Gave them a little over 4 tons of cacao. [Next day] fever hanging on me. Busy getting stuff ready for *Lunawanna*' which Hugh brought up to Turtle Bay from Diamond Island on 25 October. Next day he left in her for Aoba on a recruiting trip. On 27 October Graham Kerr 'went down to Julius Petersen's and fixed up with Dick Hoffman re Nordvi's place. We sell to him at 70 pounds. Petersen gave cheque. Spoke to Petersen about putting his place under offer to us'.

It seems that Emile My's visit had been one of inspection to see what was on offer to Ballandes and that Mate Wulu was also under consideration with Julius Petersen still hesitant. Graham Kerr had an ambitious plan in mind to make Turtle Bay the centre of French influence in preference to Vila, Port Sandwich, or the Segond Channel; buying up the plantations in the vicinity and extending them back into the hinterland.¹⁶ 'It would not be a vast undertaking to make a passage for a steamer like the *Pacifique* to come into the Harbour here.' The purchase of Matt Wells' plantation behind Turtle Bay plantation was a tentative step in that direction.

Graham was trying to stock-take, to bring the plantation management books up to date and get the *White Heather* in proper running order, before *Pacifique* arrived at Segond Channel, when he would return on her to Sydney. Fysh called in one day on his way to Pentecost.

'Low fever back again.' By 6 November 'Johnston and I busy all day with Labour Accounts, posting up from register.' But 7 November saw *Lunawanna* back 'with 17 recruits from Maewo. Very good for a little over a week—28 years labour.' She had only returned because of threatened bad weather. Hugh may have been a bad plantation manager but he certainly had a way with the Islanders. 'Aldington in with his new craft [*Flying Fox*] from Noumea on his way to Torres.' He and Hugh moved the two craft down to the shelter of Diamond Island in case of trouble as Turtle Bay was too exposed. Graham, Hugh, Champion and Aldington had a game of cards in the evening.

On 12 November Graham Kerr: 'Went down to [Julius] Petersen's as I am trying to get him to put his place under offer to us'. He was now clearing up all outstanding administrative matters and was well on with his work. '*Lunawanna* came up from Harbour and started to load cotton to take down to *Pacifique*'. Loading was finished by 14 November and *Lunawanna* went down to Petersen's anchorage at Mate Wulu where Graham Kerr was to go on board next day.

Said goodbye to Johnston and rode down to Petersen's to leave the horse I have been using to quieten him.

They left Diamond Island for Segond Channel on 15 November only to find *Pacifique* had not arrived. My father put in several days '*just waiting*'—a statement fraught with frustration and a recurrent theme in many of his diaries. While there he visited Houchard's 'to see the new drying house'. French plantations were much better equipped and he was well aware that Turtle Bay equipment needed up-

dating. This was the time that Graham Kerr had the indispensable 'Ariké and a boy fixing up Bella's grave and putting a little tablet'.

18 November. Still no *Pacifique*. 'Not feeling very well today. Ran up the river in Salisbury's launch in afternoon. Dinner on Thomas's craft. *Verdun* came in about 10 pm and ran into us although riding-light burning clearly. No damage to us—some to *Verdun*.' It would have been the last straw if the just-repaired *Lunawanna* had been damaged.

Pacifique arrived on 20 November and *Lunawanna* 'went alongside ... and shipped her cotton and received cargo'. She would return with Hugh to Turtle Bay after delivering some rollers to Hawkesby at Malo.

At last on 21 November Graham Kerr was on his way home. They reached Mélé, Efate soon after daylight on 22 November and he 'got a passage to Vila on Ballandes' launch. Fixed up Customs dues to end of October. Saw Mr Wallace and left two land titles with him (Turtle Bay titles) to put in application to Land Court'. After seeing the British Labour Inspector, E.G. Seagoe, he had many other people to catch up with including Schmidt of de Béchade's to 'collect 7000 francs for which I had a draft on them in Noumea'.

He also collected some pineapples from Mme. Cayrol to take home to Sydney and had already bought bananas at Mélé in the morning. 'Discussing business with Mr My in the afternoon. There is a big Swedish steamer in, loading copra for America. Left for Noumea about 7pm [22 November]. Full ship.'

They arrived in Noumea on 24 November where my father called on various people on business, Ballandes, de Béchades, Hagens, and the *Banque de L'Indo-Chine*, and sent off a cable to let my mother and the office know he was coming. He also saw a long-time friend, M.L. Austin, who wanted him to go to dinner at the club that night. He intended to go but had to refuse as he was not well.

Pacifique 'entered Sydney Heads between 6 and 7am 30 November. Stopped at Watsons Bay for Doctor. Went to Woolloomooloo but they find we are to go to the Quay. Had to wait till 9.30 to be allowed to go into the Quay'.

He was met by his sister Agnes Kerr and Richard My who was working in the office at that time:

Went out home and found all well. Made the acquaintance of my son Lennie. Bright little chap. Good to be back.

On 6 December a reporter from *Sydney Morning Herald* came into the office for an article on the New Hebrides which appeared on 20 December under the title: 'New Hebrides. Cession to France favoured. Condominium unwieldy'¹⁷, saying:

The settlers in the New Hebrides, to a man, condemn the Condominium form of government according to Mr G.L.S. Kerr, of Kerr Bros. Ltd who has recently returned from a visit to that group'.

The ideas expressed in the article were sure not to find favour in Australian government circles, nor with New Hebrides Mission supporters but I would hazard a guess that most ordinary Australians could not have cared less what was going on in the Pacific. They had enough to think about at home. Graham Kerr asked:

Why cannot the group be either French or British? The French have far the greatest interests there commercially and it is only a matter of time when they will have such a preponderating interest that to all intents and purposes the islands will be French but governed by this Condominium with all its unwieldy duplication of functions.

He thought Australia had enough on her plate already without the New Hebrides. 'France has New Caledonia and it would not weaken Australia's position at all if France had the New Hebrides too'.

New Hebrides lay out past New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean and only 360 miles separated the two groups. Ignoring the fact that both places really belonged to their own Indigenous people—not taken into account in those days—perhaps France had a greater right than Britain, her Condominium partner, who did not want the Group anyway. This brings us back to Australian Government and New

Hebrides Mission opinion that France had no right to any colonies off the Australian coast and nor did any other foreign nation for that matter.

In the article Mr Kerr indicated that New Caledonia was at present in a depressed state—not because she was a bad coloniser—but

... being a mineral and cattle country, it could not be otherwise with the slackness in both those lines. Being an agricultural country, New Hebrides stands much better, but New Caledonia will take her place in the scheme of things when world conditions become more normal.

‘From a productive point of view,’ Mr Kerr said, ‘the New Hebrides is going ahead rapidly with copra, cocoa and cotton, but unfortunately little of the trade was coming to Australia. In copra there would be something like 6000 tons exported for the year, a small proportion only coming to Sydney.’

He knew what he was talking about. Trade from the New Hebrides had never been aided by Australia, despite the fact that most goods supplied to the Group had to be purchased there. So entrenched was the official policy towards New Hebrides that he might as well have held his breath. In fact by speaking he probably added one more black mark to the name of a family who did not support the official line—however reasonable were the arguments brought forward. Graham Kerr held similar views to the majority of settlers both British and French who lived in the Group.

As was often the case, my father’s malaria worsened when he returned to Sydney. Much work needed attention there after his long absence, but on 8 December he ‘felt so bad passing Mater Misericordia Hospital [at Crows Nest] that [he] went in. A doctor sounded my heart and prescribed for the fever but said he knew nothing about it. Dragged myself home’. Back in the 1920s quinine seemed to be the only medicine prescribed for malaria.

Both *Pacifique* and *Makambo* were in which brought about the usual rushed activity. Richard My and Harry Guillemot, another young Frenchman, were on hand to help him. My father was certainly turning his thoughts to all things French for this is the time that he arranged for Guillemot to start French lessons at home—‘so far 4 pupils, M, Agnes, Midge [Muriel’s sister] and myself’. I don’t think they got far ahead. My father was no linguist and never became fluent in French although he could understand what was said to him. His lack of fluent French would become a grave disability in future when called upon to defend his actions in Paris.



Photo 23: Beach at Nielsen Park, Vacluse, Sydney, summer 1922–23; standing Katharine Kerr, sitting left to right Joyce Kerr, Margaret Kerr and Joyce Bell.

W.M. Hughes was returned as Prime Minister in the Federal elections soon after my father’s return but with a reduced majority.

The year ended as usual with a party at Grandma’s place in Willoughby at Christmas and another one on New Year’s Eve ‘children in the afternoon and grownups in the evening’. Among them were Thelma and Joyce Bell, daughters of William Lockhart Bell.

What follows is an outline of official happenings in the Condominium that year. It was a year of delay tactics on the part of the

French while England tried to get the Joint Court up and running, and the Protocol of 1914 proclaimed, but with no great hope of success. These the onset of the World War had put on hold.

The first step for England was to appoint a British Judge to the Joint Court. This was Robert Steven De Vere who took up his post at the end of May thinking that his salary, paid in francs, was 'far from generous'.

The French Judge, M. Mabilie, at present on leave, was due back in October but on 14 December 1922 King reported to Sir Cecil Rodwell that Mabilie had been appointed President of the Court of Appeal in Noumea. So the opening of the Joint Court was further delayed, and also that of the French National Court so that no French settler charged with infractions against Condominium regulations could be dealt with and there were many of them.

The depreciation of the franc in which all Condominium salaries were paid caused many problems to the recipients both French and British. And all settlers of either persuasion wondered why they were being paid any money at all when the Court was not functioning.

Dr Borgesius, Native Advocate, had acted as Public Prosecutor, after Esperanza went on leave in 1914, and then as President while awaiting the latter's long-delayed return. He then left for Holland in 1920. He now proposed to return to New Hebrides as Public Prosecutor but was told to accept the position of Native Advocate or nothing and that there was no house for him. King said a house would need to be built but this was more expense which neither England nor France was willing to incur.

Borgesius had encountered trouble in his job as Native Advocate. In the course of his duties, in trying to protect the rights of the Indigenous people, he had fared badly with the French. The New Hebrides Mission was also not enamoured of a Dutch Native Advocate. They saw themselves in that role and, as the Western Pacific High Commission did nothing to disabuse them, Borgesius found himself embroiled in English versus French politics.

Then there was Jules de Leener, Registrar of the Joint Court (from 22 October 1915) and Acting President, when Borgesius went on long-delayed leave in 1920. For 6 years from April 1916, he had been Acting Public Prosecutor. He objected to taking up his lower-paid job of Registrar again, and threatened to resign. This was understandable as his son was being educated in Sydney and the franc, depreciated against sterling, made that very difficult. Both Merton King and the French Resident Commissioner, Henri D'Arboussier, wanted de Leener to stay on in some capacity, perhaps that of Native Advocate, if Borgesius refused that post:

The experience acquired by M de Leener during his service as Registrar and Acting Public Prosecutor, combined with his perfect knowledge of both English and French, particularly qualify him.¹⁸

Both Sir Charles Rodwell and the Secretary of State Colonial Office agreed but the French Government procrastinated. They really did not want the Joint Court to open nor did they want a Native Advocate. The French Resident Commissioner in Vila was kept in the dark as to his Government's exact intentions.

And the President of the Joint Court, Count Buena de Esperanza was still not back. His latest delay tactic was that the Protocol of 1914 should be proclaimed before he returned so that he could start working immediately. That would mean new appointments, surveyors to inspect all land claims submitted to the Joint Court and also the appointment of officers to the Administrative Districts, yet to be decided on, and the setting up of Courts of First Instance. These were to be native tribunals.

On 12 April 1922 Merton King made certain observations on the Courts of First Instance.¹⁹ He thought the establishment of such courts would take time:

The President... is evidently under the impression that the natives of the New Hebrides are as advanced in such matters as were the Polynesians of Fiji, Samoa, Tonga etc. before European occupation of those Groups ... With the New Hebridean ... there is no homogeneity ... Each island has a different language ... Therefore to make a trustworthy record of the customs obtaining in the Group would require a close study of the people for many years ... As for laws, as such, the New Hebridean cannot be said to have any: each man is a law to himself. The only law recognised before the establishment of the present administration, was force ... which was usually invoked when disputes arose affecting women and land ... Since the establishment of the Condominium ... the natives

have, to certain extent, learnt the laws of the 'white man' ... and I think there are few ... native communities ... that do not now realise more or less clearly what constitutes right and wrong in the eyes of that law.

King did bring up the fear engendered in the Islanders in earlier times—perhaps 'the most dreaded law of all—the law of the "man-o'-war" ... for its sanctions generally included deportation'. As the Royal Navy Australia Station (RNAS) and Joint Naval Commission no longer made regular patrols of the Group an independent opinion on what was happening no longer existed.

King thought that the penal side of a code prepared in 1917, but declared in December 1917 to be *ultra vires*, was 'sufficient for all present requirements as affecting offences committed by natives against natives'. Certain shortcomings could be remedied and he saw no reason why it could not be put into force at once.

I mentioned the arrival of the French warship *Aldebaran* earlier. It put into Suva on the way.²⁰ Charles Revel, French Inspector-General of the Colonies was interviewed by the Chief Clerk and Accountant of the Western Pacific High Commission. Where, I wonder, was the High Commissioner? Revel, it seems, had been in the New Hebrides in 1921 and knew Merton King. He 'emphasized the keen desire of the French court to proceed with Land Titles work'. The Chief Clerk 'mildly insinuated that the cessation of that work by the Joint Court was a direct result of French representations in 1915'. He noted that Revel 'made one curious misstatement regarding the Joint Court, viz.: that it has been moribund since the Count de Buena Esperanza left the New Hebrides in 1914. I did not correct him'. Perhaps he should have. And anyway there was no French Judge to preside at the French Court at this time.

King, too, noted the arrival of the French aviso *Aldebaran* in Vila on 15 April.²¹ It then departed for Noumea, returning on 27 April on a trip of inspection of the northern islands of the Group, making its final departure on 17 May. *Aldebaran* paid another visit to Vila on 23 November this time from Saigon. She departed for Noumea on 26 November.

On 18 March 1922 the Protocol of 1914 was ratified by England. It only remained to give legal effect to it in the New Hebrides if the French government would also ratify.

On 26 April King sent Rodwell an extract from the French newspaper *Le Messenger* giving a report of the New Caledonian *Conseil Général* on the New Hebrides.²² In it was the suggestion that the fate of the Group should be decided by a referendum of the British and French settlers. The *Secrétaire Général* supported the suggestion on the behalf of the Government of New Caledonia, wrote King, but he himself thought it 'somewhat naïve'. Naïve perhaps, but King knew that most British settlers were fed-up with the administration of the Condominium and many of them had become pro-French because of the lack of interest of their own government. Sensible suggestions of the New Hebrides Association were ignored. Attempts were being made to raise the salaries of the many Condominium officials, but in the meantime settler pleas for the building of hospitals and urgently-needed roads, and for setting up a scientific establishment to study agricultural pests were dismissed as too expensive—or the suggestion made that more taxes should be raised to pay for them. This was when settlers considered themselves already over-governed and overtaxed. The French were aware of this and prepared to take advantage of it.

In March King and D'Arboussier met and agreed to set up five administrative districts²³: Santo, to include all the islands off the east and south coasts of Santo, plus the Banks and Torres Groups; Malekula to include Ambrym, Epi, Paama, Lopevi and islands lying off Epi; Aoba to include Pentecost and Maewo; Efate to include Nguna, Emae and the Shepherd groups; Tanna to include Erromango, Aneityum, Futuna and Aniwa. All the northern islands including Efate have mixed English and French settlers so two Government Agents would be necessary.

Tanna, wrote King, needed special consideration. Tanna and Erromango were colonised by British settlers, hence two agents were unnecessary. 'In view of the heavy charges on Condominium funds of the provision of two agents in this case this needs consideration [a sensitive matter with the French]. The common idea is that these islands are regarded by ourselves as a British preserve.'

Two agents were necessary in French opinion, as Tanna and Erromango were, like the other islands of the Group, also part of the Condominium. This relates back to the infamous Wilkes versus Reverend Nicholson confrontation on Tanna in 1913, still fresh in French minds and deeply resented.²⁴

If all this is agreed, launches, houses, police quarters, lock-ups and so on will have to be provided, King wrote.

For reasons of economy the French wanted the number of districts reduced to four but on 25 August the Secretary of State British Colonial Office told Rodwell he preferred the original proposal and the expense was fully justified. Merton King was approached and he informed Rodwell on 5 September that his French colleague, at present absent in Noumea, expresses no opinion either from point of view of economy or otherwise.²⁵

By 13 October Jules Repiquet, French High Commissioner, who knew the New Hebrides well from his earlier sojourn there as French Resident, gave his reasons for believing and that only three Administrative Districts were necessary, exclusive of Efate.²⁶ This would save expense whereas the British proposal increased it. Sir Cecil Rodwell was forced to agree on 17 November. District One would include the islands north of the line through Bougainville Strait to Patteson Passage, including Aoba and Maewo; District Two, Malekula, Ambrym, Epi, Pentecost and small islands lying off; and District Three, Tanna, and Erromango, Aneityum.

To get established in the Third District was most important to the French. They were already well represented in the northern islands of the Group but the Presbyterian Mission did not want them in the southern islands which they regarded as exclusively their domain.

From an article published in the French *Bulletin Du Commerce* of 10 November 1922 (given in translation):

The New Protocol of 1914 only comes into force, they say, in the course of next year. In this Protocol special arrangements exist that French Government Agents are to be henceforth installed in the southern islands of the Group concurrently with British Government Agents. These are Erromango, Tanna and Aneityum which the British Residency on Efate regards a little too much as its exclusive territory. The British Presbyterians are installed as Masters here and some serious conflicts have been avoided thanks to the patience and conciliation of the French [Condominium] authorities. This derogation of the Condominium regulations will now happily come to an end.²⁷

This referred to the disastrous rule of Arthur Mahaffy in 1912–1913 while Merton King was on leave. Mahaffy's tactless partisan actions upset the good relations between France and England set up so carefully by King and his French colleague at that time, Jules Repiquet.

William Wilkes the British Government Agent on Tanna had opposed a ranting Reverend Nicholson who was trying to stop the French from embarking 'heathen' recruits at Lenakel. Embarrassed by Wilkes' actions—though these were fully justified—the Western Pacific High Commission sacked Wilkes, who as a Condominium officer, could only be so treated with the assent of the French.

The *Bulletin* article also brought up the problem of labour which was decreasing year by year:

This is why all the settlers eagerly wish that the various schemes for the importation of Asian labour should be crowned with success.

Sir Cecil Rodwell contacted Repiquet on 23 November to see if he would agree to regard the administrative divisions as provisional and open for reconsideration after two years. He also asked for an extra British officer to be appointed to the Banks Group to assist the British Government Agent on Santo, his personal emoluments to be paid by the British government and the remainder of expenses by the Condominium.²⁸ Repiquet replied by telegram on 13 December agreeing to the first but needing more time to consider the second.

The Banks Group held mining rights contested by several people. This was one of the points that had to be settled before the Protocol could be ratified by both parties. The point concerned '*litiges immobiliers*' that is property disputes covering mines and minerals and everything below the surface of the soil.²⁹

It did not look as if the Protocol of 1914 would get off the ground by 1 November 1922. The French playing for time wanted it deferred until January 1923. A report was awaited from the French High Commissioner in New Caledonia, Jules Repiquet.

But the Joint Court, vital to implementing the Protocol, could not open until Esperanza arrived. He was requested through the British Ambassador in Madrid 'to return to Port Vila at his earliest convenience in view of the fact that the outstanding questions which prevented his earlier departure have now been decided'.³⁰ Esperanza's salary had been raised to 30.000 F with a supplement of 7.400 F. The response said of Esperanza:

... the old gentleman is much incensed because the Colonial Office insists on paying him now in francs, whereas formerly, he declares, he was always paid in sterling.

On 27 December 1922, with the year almost gone, King sent a telegram to Rodwell saying he 'would be glad to be informed of early departure of [Esperanza]'. The reply may well have been and so would everybody else.

The position of Native Advocate and a house for him to live in was also causing problems. Dr Borgesius had arrived back in Vila on 18 December and was provisionally lodged in the house of the President of the Joint Court, but on 8 December the Secretary of State Colonial Office told Rodwell of the proposed appointment of Borgesius as Public Prosecutor. The King of Spain had agreed to the appointment but the consent of the Queen of Holland had to be obtained as he was Dutch subject.

At the same time De Leener was proposed for the position of Native Advocate but asked to continue to perform the duties of Registrar pending the appointment of a successor. De Leener would in the meantime be offered half the salary of Registrar as well as the full salary of Native Advocate.

On 22 December King told Rodwell that he did not think that de Leener would accept the position as there was no house for him.³¹ The French agreed to pay their share towards the house but still de Leener was not tempted.

It was obvious that once the Protocol was proclaimed by both England and France it would incur greater financial outlay. The estimates of expenditure for 1921 had showed a surplus, but on 20 July King warned that this was 'mainly due to the accumulation of unexpended appropriations on incomplete establishments and other services consequent on the suspension of the work of the Joint Court and other similar causes'.³²

He ended his despatch

... should the time arrive, when the services under the 1914 Protocol [be] fully organised, and all the demands of the Joint Court [be] satisfied, there are local objects to which such surplus might, in justice to the [Condominium] taxpayers, be applied and the endeavour be made to remove the reproach often cast at the Condominium administration, that the greater part of its income is appropriated to the service of the single item of 'personal emoluments'.

There is a very revealing comment on the front of this despatch, addressed to the Secretary, Western Pacific High Commission:

Mr King's reference ... to justice to the taxpayers is rather naïf. He apparently forgets the poor British taxpayer saddled with such a 'white elephant' as the New Hebrides.

King was in no way naive and sadly he was now coming to the end of his long 14 year service as British Resident Commissioner. On 29 November Rodwell recommended to the Secretary of State Colonial Office that Merton King be appointed Assistant High Commissioner, Western Pacific High

Commission, with special charge of New Hebrides affairs. Geoffrey Smith-Rewse, recently appointed Deputy Commissioner Western Pacific High Commission, would take his place in New Hebrides.³³ This seemed a good idea to Rodwell, the Western Pacific High Commission being overworked anyway. He was one of the few High Commissioners with any appreciation of what the Western Pacific High Commission attitude to the New Hebrides was doing to British settlers there.

Yet another change looked to be brewing for the region. King sent Rodwell an article from *La France Australe* 29 November 1922 to that effect, this time from a French source.³⁴ This was to transfer the powers and duties held by the French High Commissioner for the Pacific from the Governor of New Caledonia to the French Governor-General of Indo-China. Attachment to this rich colony would solve many problems; labour for French settlers in New Hebrides and New Caledonia; maritime communication connecting up all the French Pacific Islands with French Indo-China; creation of shipping routes; and docks for refitting ships. The *piastre* would become the French currency of the region rather than the depreciated French franc thus removing many of the problems that now dogged New Caledonia.

‘A unique opportunity to-day offers itself for us to get out of this “economic” lethargy’—noted Graham Kerr in his diary when he visited Noumea in 1922. But King at this time did not see any advantages as far as New Hebrides was concerned, Noumea was only ‘a little over 300 miles from Vila. French Indo-China at least 4000 miles away’.

So this was the reason for the visit of the *Aldebaran* with the French Director-General of Colonies, Charles Revel, on board. This is what Graham Kerr would have heard about from Revel himself, after offering the Kerr Family assets in the Group to Ballandes earlier in the year, and elaborating his own ideas for French development and expansion of the Turtle Bay area. Given the current stagnant, going-nowhere-fast-government of the New Hebrides, Graham Kerr’s enthusiasm for a change becomes understandable.

Predictably the New Hebrides Mission was also busy. On 18 December 1922 a deputation to see the Secretary of State Colonial Office was arranged by A.K. Langridge, British M.P. and powerful supporter of the New Hebrides Mission.³⁵ The deputation consisted of Reverends Frater and F.G. Bowie introduced by the Bishop of Melanesia.

Both Frater and Bowie agreed that the Protocol was a considerable improvement on the convention of 1906 but unless the French saw it was carried out, abuses, particularly in recruitment of woman and sale of alcohol, would continue. They did concede that there were many estimable French residents and spoke highly of Merton King whose friendly relations with French authorities have materially assisted the working of the Condominium. After that came a list of all the things that were wrong and included the usual diatribes against the French.

There was now much discussion in the Colonial Office about the unsatisfactory New Hebrides situation, including an Imperial Meeting on the matter in 1921 with the Prime Ministers of both Australia and New Zealand present.³⁶ Another meeting was proposed for 1923. There was so little improvement that His Majesty’s government was seriously considering some radical change.

Strategically the Group was of no value to Great Britain and financially it was an annual drain on her finances and, at any time, more funds might be needed. But what were the alternatives: cession of the Group to Great Britain was out of the question as the French Government would not consent and, more importantly, England did not want full responsibility for the New Hebrides under any circumstances. Another alternative was cession to France which would be very popular with the French Colonial Party but...

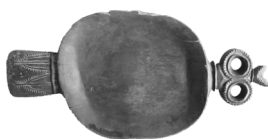
The New Hebrides Mission deputation on 18 December 1922 made it clear during a long discussion that if partition, another alternative, was also out of the question and England wanted no part of the Group ‘then the Condominium must continue with all its inherent difficulties and embarrassments’. As the Colonial Office had admitted in its résumé of the situation 23 June 1921: ‘The mainstay of British influence is the Presbyterian Mission which is the most powerful Mission in the Group’ and, if the truth was told, the Mission was the basic cause of the bitterness and dissension and non-cooperation, not only of the French but of the many British settlers who did not toe the New Hebrides Mission line.

Endnotes

- 1 From a letter D.H. to G. Kerr 10 April 1922. She had gone ashore at Devil Rock and Ballandes vessel *St Michel* had offered help but they managed to get her off by themselves.
- 2 WPHC 639/1922.
- 3 Her husband would be officially recognised as Acting British Consul to New Caledonia by Jules Repiquet later in the year. Reel G21256. HBM. Consul. Corres 1875–1963. The Consul, T.D. Dunlop, had not arrived at his post, Thomas Johnston acting in his place. On 1 Aug 1920 the Foreign Office conveyed to him Lord Curzon's thanks 'for the service you have rendered to H.M.'s Government by your efficient conduct of the post during the lengthy period you have been in charge of it'. On 14 May 1919 Johnston had told the Sec. of State F.O. 'I have filled the position of Acting Consul on several occasions during the last seven years relieving Consuls Holmes and Venables and have been for nearly 30 years Lloyd's Agent for New Caledonia'. My own family had close connections with Johnston dating back to the 1890s when Captain Macleod was alive. Unfortunately for us the Foreign Office now had no jurisdiction over the New Hebrides, that power resting solely with the Colonial Office and WPHC.
- 4 Letter D.H. Kerr to G. Kerr, 10 April 1922.
- 5 I am not sure where Kabota actually did his work. Hugh mentions Malvanoua Island which I found on the map. My father said Diamond Island which I cannot find, probably because it was very small. Perhaps they are the same place? Malvanoua lies off Point Sanif and the entrance to the passage leading to Mate Wulu.
- 6 This would be the Oceanic Rubber Planting and Trading Co. Ltd. in the Banks Group on Vanua Lava, an Australian company established circa 1911 to grow rubber and coconuts, of which Albert Choyer a French citizen was Director. R.J. Aldington, Joe Hawkesby and Frank Whitford were employed there at this time.
- 7 The Champion family had connections with New Caledonia and New Hebrides going back to Capt. Macleod's time. This one would be Walter Hutton Champion, Master Mariner, 1845-1925.
- 8 Fortuné La Chaise 1854-1923 was a half-caste Frenchman born at Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean. See *Hébridais* pp. 119–120 for short biography.
- 9 Raymond Gardel 1890-. See *Hébridais* p. 74 for short biography.
- 10 See WPHC 137/1922, King to WPH Cmr 24 Dec 1921 reporting the death of Paul Freudenreich, a man of about 50, apparently quiet and inoffensive, in charge of a store on Aoba owned by a fellow-countryman called Morin. This was not far from the place Rev. C. Godden met his end in 1905. T.R. Salisbury, Condominium Agent at Second Channel Santo, accompanied Freudenreich's brother to Aoba and found no reason for the murder except theft of money; only one Islander knowing where it was kept. Salisbury told the Islanders that if they did not give up the culprits, the local chiefs would be taken to Vila. This is what *Aldebaran* was doing, Freudenreich being under the French regime.
- 11 On 12 June 1922, Mathew George Wells and his brother Samuel Ezekiel Wells sold their property called Ramona (Ramone) to Messrs. Kerr Bros. They had originally bought it from ni-Santo in two lots on 19 and 20 July 1907. Application to Joint Court Registry No. 75 of 2 July 1913. This will be one of the properties sold by Kerr Bros to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in October 1928. A copy of title, No. 640, transferred to SFNH, presented to the Joint Court 5 Sept 1955, is held by the author. This purchase had something to do with a proposition my father had put before Charles Revel.
- 12 Although I cannot remember it, my first Christmas in 1917 was spent at this pretty place which I again visited in 1999. Reece Discombe told me that the little beach there is still called Kerr's Landing.
- 13 WPHC 757/1922, King to WPH Cmr, Confidential, 16 Feb 1922 re Recruitment of labour for the half year ending Dec 1921. There were 'irregularities (not of a serious nature), all dealing with women', French mostly, but cannot be dealt with without the Joint Court. King pointed out that British recruiters were also involved. A loophole in Kings Reg of 1913 allowed women to come as 'wives' of male recruits. Nearly a hundred women were employed in this way on British plantations. He thought that women should be able to be indentured. 'In the native communities all, or nearly all, the field work is done by the women, so no ill-effects should ... be apprehended by their performing similar service under proper supervision.'
- 14 One of Graham Kerr's grievances against Hugh Kerr was that he did not look after tools properly and often sent the Labour force out equipped with the wrong ones to do the jobs in hand.
- 15 Letter G.L.S. Kerr to Kerr Brothers Office Sydney 6 Sept 1922. 'Very poor trip—only two returns and one new man. They tried Malekula, Maewo, Pentecost and Aoba. Champion is too impatient I am afraid. They are now away to the Banks and Torres. I am hoping they will do something worthwhile there. Petersen got 18 at the Banks and 2 at Torres and Dick Hoffman got another 14 at Lombaha. A big crowd has gone home to Torres'. Regarding Johnston: 'I am afraid we will not be able to keep him as his name is so bad at some places, Malekula particularly. I hope it is alright at Torres and Banks'.
- 16 Letter G.L.S. Kerr to K.B. office Sydney 3 Oct 1922. 'I wrote to Mr My... confidentially asking him to come up in Nov to see the possibilities ... The proposition ... to take in all our property in the New Hebrides. I thought

perhaps Mr My could get a big French Company formed (Colonising Company), probably subsidised by French government ... We have a good area for them to start with ... There is cacao country there that probably equals anything in the world. With the right kind of cacao and scientific treatment it could be No. 1. It would not be a vast undertaking to make a passage to come into the Harbour here... They would want to buy land back and back and away towards Big Bay ... Perhaps Mr Largeau [New Hebrides Director *Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides*] could handle it better than Mr My'. Is this what he later in the year discussed with Charles Revel, French Minister for Colonies who was visiting the Group?

- 17 SMH 20 Dec 1922:10.
- 18 See WPHC 1975/1922, King to WPH Cmr 3 July 1922. See also WPHC 1932/ 1922, King to WPH Cmr 28 July 1922.
- 19 WPHC 1278/1922.
- 20 WPHC 964/1922, 13 April. Interview with Mr Charles Revel.
- 21 WPHC 1284/1922, King to WPH Cmr 21 April 1922.
- 22 WPHC 1293/1922, King to WPH Cmr 26 April 1922.
- 23 WPHC 1738/1922, King to WPH Cmr, 30 March 1922. Arrangements to give effect to Protocol of 1914.
- 24 The Wilkes Nicholson altercation is detailed in Book 1, especially Chapters 14 Part 2, and Chapter 15 Parts 1 & 2.
- 25 WPHC 2300/1922.
- 26 WPHC 2970/1922, Repiquet to Rodwell, 13 Oct 1922.
- 27 Article included in WPHC 74/1923 with a letter, King to Rodwell 23 Nov 1922. He considered that the article gave 'a correct reflection of French opinion on the matter'.
- 28 WPHC 3183/1922.
- 29 WPHC 2114/1922.
- 30 See WPHC 3093/1922 and WPHC 3467/1922 on the subject of Esperanza's salary.
- 31 WPHC 3250/1922.
- 32 WPHC 2325/1925, King to Rodwell 20 Dec 1922.
- 33 WPHC 3523/1922. Rodwell, unlike his Assistant Secretary, fully appreciated King's value.
- 34 WPHC 81/1923, Enclosure in Confidential Despatch 29 March 1923.
- 35 WPHC 305/1923, Sec. of State to WPH Cmr. 18 Dec 1922, Condition of affairs in the New Hebrides. Deputation of... Presbyterian Mission.
- 36 C.O. 537/964, pp.1-64. (Secret) Duke of Devonshire to G. G. of Australia 25.6.1923. Future of the New Hebrides. This report covers all aspects of the case and is very informative: pp. 41-49 is a résumé of affairs in the New Hebrides 1913-1921.



Chapter 5 1923: Colonial Office Tries to Find New Ways to Deal with its Unwanted Commitments

Business in Sydney was not good but was improving with Graham Kerr able to sell cocoa beans to Melbourne and New Zealand as well as to Smalls in Sydney. As always whenever *Pacifique* or *Makambo* put in an appearance, often at about the same time, there was a mad rush to claim cargo—mostly copra and cocoa—and cart it away to the firm's storeroom. A larger storeroom was taken this year at 412 Kent St to deal with orders for goods for the return voyages as well as attending personally to passengers. On such occasions my father caught the earliest ferry into town. Richard My was still working for the firm but by the end of the year, as a French subject aged twenty, he would have to return to Noumea to do his compulsory military training.



Photo 24: Kerr family and friends at Kermadec late 1922 early 1923. Back row from the left Donald Hugh Kerr, Richard My, Len Kerr (around 3–6 months) held by his mother Muriel Kerr, Graham Kerr, Miss Hadley. Front row Mrs D.H. Kerr (Jane Kerr), holding Margaret Kerr (3 years), Lucy Hutton (Muriel's mother, Katherine's grandmother), Katherine Kerr (5 years), Mrs Hadley (a neighbour). Photo provided by Len Kerr's family (Lisa and Gary Kerr) in early 2018.

In those days Osborne Park where we lived was cut off from the rest of Lane Cove with only one road joining Lane Cove Rd not far from Broughton Loop near the Artarmon Brickworks where the tram ended. My father tried to get the local council to put a footbridge across a gully to connect with

Longueville Road. It was considered too expensive at the time, so he himself built a steep track through our property down to River Road for easier access to the ferry from Northwood to Circular Quay.

My father seemed to have limitless energy, even borrowing a plough and horses to get a paddock ready to plant potatoes to feed his family now four girls and one boy. Our home, Kermadec, was set on three and half acres of land and we had a big garden. By the end of 1923 my father would decide that a resident gardener was necessary, appointing one in late December. Earlier Tom Poleman, a New Hebridean, had looked after things at home but the White Australia policy made it no longer possible for him to stay.¹

In between times my parents continued with French lessons, and attended 'Miss Scott's dancing class' 'learning jazz sets, foxtrot and tango'. My father also managed to fit in tennis matches and bridge parties at home and my parents entertained visitors from the Islands. Julius Petersen and his daughters Anna and Sophie were guests on several occasions as were Olga Austin and her friend Mr Taplin. There were also tennis parties with the Reid family who like other early settlers in the New Hebrides including the Usshers had settled in Lane Cove.

He also remarked on the fact that his children, one after the other, succumbed to measles this year but that was my mother's concern. He himself had a troublesome shin. It had been badly ripped by coral when *Tathra* foundered in 1912 and never really healed. He always wore a bandage, which as a child I thought all fathers wore. On 9 April he 'called at Mater Misericordia Hospital to have [his] leg seen to, but so many deadbeats waiting I left. Went to Dr Shand. Not much use though. He would talk on everything but my leg'. There was no such thing as skin grafting in those days.

Hugh Kerr arrived in Sydney 30 January 1923 on board *Pacifique* and went back when she left on 10 February, leaving Jane Kerr to return on 5 April. James Johnston was in charge at Turtle Bay in Hugh's absence.

On her next trip on 6 March *Pacifique* brought news of a bad hurricane. Epi was the worst hit. My father was worried that Tongoa might also have suffered.²

An entry in my father's diary 14 April marked in red, notified the death on 2 April of his only surviving Macleod uncle at Whangarei New Zealand. He was Captain Donald Macleod's youngest brother John and also unmarried. This left no male now alive to carry on our Macleod name of which my father was very proud.

On 8 June he left for the Islands in *Makambo* which went via Norfolk Island:

Change in the weather—blowing hard with lightening and rain. No communications with shore ... Next day *Makambo* went closer in ... the wind changed around so [she] had to knock off work ... went round to the Cascade Side but too much sea there for working. Standing off and on for the rest of the day and night.

Next day they were able to land. Graham Kerr went to visit his niece Ray Nicol, aged eight who was staying with Nash Christian. He stayed ashore all day and on returning to Cascade 'found the boats unable to work here on account of the sea. *Makambo* went round to Ball Bay and landed some more cargo there'. Mrs Rossiter drove my father there where he boarded the ship and it left for Vila. Norfolk had no all-weather port which made landing cargo a tricky business.

When they reached Vila they found *Pacifique* in from the north. Graham Kerr went on board to do what business he could before she left for Noumea. In the afternoon he visited the *Société Coopérative* located at the old Kerr Bros store to see Emile My. In the evening he had dinner with Mr My at the Club and a played game of bridge before boarding *Makambo* for the trip north. Part of the business discussed with Mr My was an arrangement to ship copra direct to France.

When they arrived at Tongoa on 19 June, he disembarked and 'got our cargo landed by evening'. His arrival 'gave Mrs Ayton and Mrs Neilly a surprise'. Mrs Ayton was about to leave Tongoa for Bushman's Bay Malekula and he was very appreciative of the way she had managed the store. Her sister, Mrs Neilly, was returning to Vila. He spent the next five days there checking off goods, marking prices for the store. Mrs Ayton and Mr Fox who was taking over were sorting up stock. On 23 June 'Mr Fox and I went up to have a look at Pakoa' which Kerr Brothers had bought in 1914. 'Very few nuts at present.

Called on the Michelsens and Newmans.’ Tongoa had suffered a severe hurricane in February 1922 and the palms were stripped of their fruit which accounted for the ‘very few nuts’.

Next day he ‘left Tongoa in a small boat... have 6 crew. Ran into Sakau and got a bigger boat—Morrison Neil coming on with us ... Landed at Voambi (Roxburgh’s) before dark’.³ Here he stayed the night, waiting for *Makambo* to call in on her way back to Vila from the north.

He was on now on his way back to Sydney and had a full day in Vila changing ‘600 pounds silver from Tongoa to draft on Sydney’. Then he went to the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles-Hébridais*, Burns Philp and Company, *Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles Hébrides*, G. de Béchades, Customs and the British Government Offices on business. He had dinner with Mr and Mrs My before leaving that evening.



Photo 25: Taken sometime about 1925 after Mrs Ayton had left Tongoa: members of the Ayton and Neilly families meeting a ship arriving in Sydney—a common activity for Kerr families also. Left to right (behind the boys) Alexina Ayton, Ella Neilly, unknown man, Agnes Johnson née Cronstedt (married to F.E. Johnson in 1911), Greta Sarginson (daughter of Alexina). Boys John Ayton and Maurice Neilly. (Photo and caption provided by Suzanne Ellis, great granddaughter of Axel and Esther Cronstedt.)

Makambo carried no cargo but by the time they left Norfolk for Lord Howe they had a full complement of passengers. They were off Lord Howe early on 4 July but did not stay long at anchor. ‘Signal from the shore, too rough to work. Standing on and off the island all day and night.’ Lord Howe was another place with no reliable anchorage in all weather. Next day they were able to run in and anchor. ‘Went ashore ... to the other side from Ned’s Beach. At Mrs Dignam’s—a very pretty place. Had morning tea there ... Got away for Sydney about noon.’ They arrived back in Sydney 7 July in very rough conditions where he went home with just his hand-luggage. ‘Found all well.’

Next day he learned that *Makambo* was to leave again on 11 July: ‘That is ridiculous’. Fortunately she was delayed until 14 July, so by rushing round my father was able to fulfil orders and get the necessary documents on board before she left port. After which he took ‘Margety’, his youngest daughter then aged nearly four for a walk before going to tennis at the club in the afternoon.

On the following Monday 16 July, he and my mother ‘went to the Arabian Nights Ball at Palais Royal (Moore Park). We were asked to go with Mr and Mrs Williams of Longueville in their car’. Cars were a very rare commodity in 1923:

The Ball was a gorgeous spectacle—the decorations and lights being wonderful. Music by Frank Ellis’ Californian Band was splendid. Said to be about 2500 people present. Dancing was quite comfortable however but there was far too much drinking going on

generally. Some young girls were quite 'tipsy'. Makes me a bit of a Prohibitionist ... We left about 2am.

The young 'Flappers' of the 'Roaring 20s' were beginning to come into their own and there was much correspondence in the newspapers about 'Our Girls'. Fortunately my father did not carry Prohibition into his home. When we got a little older I well remember champagne sparkling in the hollow-stemmed glasses we were given with our New Year's dinner. Mme. Klehm gave them to my mother when she left Vila in 1918. Also—but of course we did not tell my father—if any guest left wine in his glass after a dinner party at home, we enjoyed quaffing it off while we cleared the table when they left to go into the drawing room.

On 1 August the office staff was almost inundated with cocoa beans.⁴ They were at the storeroom 'sending out 10 tons of cocoa beans which, with 5 tons from the wharf, makes 15 tons going to New Zealand'. But that did not mean that the store room was now empty as next day they received 100 sacks of cocoa beans from *Pacifique* which had just departed. Copra was in short supply in 1923 and low-priced, so good trade in cocoa beans was welcome.

On 3 August Graham Kerr produced the Director's Report for Kerr Bros. Ltd for the year ending 31 October 1922. 'The budget only just on the right side—maintenance items which might have been spread over several years charged up in advance, as we considered it a sounder policy.'

The low value of copra throughout the year was reflected in the figures for Santo. Work went ahead steadily at Turtle Bay though the labour was unfortunately in short supply:

New land brought into cultivation, planted with cotton, and coconuts. Output of copra satisfactory—values very low. Cotton crop affected by exceptionally wet weather at picking time. Cocoa coming on very well—very good country for cocoa growing but treatment for market, fermenting, drying, etc. very much behind the methods of other cocoa countries. We must put in a proper drying plant. Cocoa is attractive because it does not require so much labour in the bearing stage. During the year we bought the Wells estate at the back of Turtle Bay.

Vila properties—K.B. House, and K.B. Store—under lease to the *Société Coopérative*. Tongoa trading station suffered from a blow early in 1922; very little copra as a result. Business only fair because of restricted buying caused by copra shortage. *Lunawanna* a very fine craft for recruiting purposes, will be even better when she gets the new engine we have ordered. As for *White Heather* we hope to sell her as she is not much use to us.

Graham Kerr discussed *White Heather* with Mr Fox in a letter 1 October. 1923:

It is a drawback at Tongoa having no shelter for a craft. Will discuss the matter with my brother at Santo. Perhaps later on you could take a run up to Santo, when you have everything fixed up comfortably at Tongoa. On 18 August Mrs Fox and her three children had left in *Makambo* to join Everard Fox at Tongoa.

Once again, after seeing to cargo for Turtle Bay loaded on *Makambo* Graham Kerr was getting ready to go to New Hebrides; this time on *Pacifique*. He had been busy disposing of the 157 sacks of coconuts she had landed to Chinese firms in Sydney. On 27 September our mother, Joyce aged 10 and I, aged almost 6, saw him off: first stop Noumea.

After stopping at Vila 4 October where *Makambo* was at anchor, *Pacifique* wended her way north, reaching Second Channel on 5 October where Hugh Kerr met them with *Lunawanna*, carrying a cargo of cocoa and cotton to be loaded into her hold for Sydney. 'Very busy attending to clients.'

Next day:

we left about 7am for Turtle Bay. We gave Julius Petersen a tow out ... as his engine is out of action for the moment. Arrived Turtle Bay about 11 am. Had breakfast with

Johnston [who] is looking very well. *Makambo* came up from Petersen's in the afternoon and landed our cargo and took on copra. She is leaving during the night for Aoba.

Lunawanna had been issued a licence to recruit 100 labourers on 11 September and was due to return paid-off Islanders and try and recruit others, leaving on 11 October. Labour Registers always had to be ready for inspection by the British Inspector of Labour—at that time E.G. Seagoe. Hugh Kerr was not in charge this time, as on 13 October, he brought *White Heather* up from Diamond Island:

We left for Thomas's at Hog Harbour at 10 past 11 am. Thomas was very eager to get us round this weekend for tennis etc. Mrs D.H. and Sophie Petersen on board. Arrived at Thomas's just after 2 o'clock. Ran all the way under engine no wind. Made welcome at Thomas's. Tennis in afternoon. Theo Thomas has quite a good tennis court put down. Mr and Miss Anderson and Mr Salisbury at tennis besides our party. Bridge in the evening, Salisbury and I versus D.H. and Thomas.

Next day there was more tennis, interspersed with swims:

We went round to Salisbury's to dinner in the evening. While waiting for dinner we had a most extraordinary view of a shooting meteor or something of the kind. It shot across our field of vision from the East towards the moon leaving a beautiful track behind it. I never before saw anything of the kind. The track was quite plain for over half an hour, gradually getting wavery and faint. It was a most beautiful sight. Mr Salisbury gave us a good time, He has made a beautiful place here ... We had dinner set amongst the ferns by a summer house.

Back to Turtle Bay next day, 15 October. We had a most enjoyable time and both Thomas and Salisbury went to a great deal of trouble and treated us very well.

On 20 October Hugh Kerr and his wife Jane left in *White Heather* to attend a meeting of the British New Hebrides Association at T.C. Stephens' plantation at South Santo. This must have been a pleasant alleviation for Jane Kerr from the lonely situation she usually occupied as the only white woman on Turtle Bay plantation with no children of her own to keep her company.

D.H. and Jane occupied the house on Diamond Island and, in their absence, Graham Kerr stayed there finding it very pleasant—'no mosquitoes'. Johnston lived in the house on the mainland where he sometimes breakfasted. Meanwhile he and Johnston did a stock-take and balanced off the labour ledger for the year. Kerr was getting ready to depart and everything had to be in order. He said goodbye to Johnston on 1 November and the next day left for Second Channel in *White Heather* accompanied by Hugh and Julius Petersen.

When he reached Sydney on 13 November he received news that his elder brother William Kerr who lived in New Zealand had died which meant that he and Hugh were now the only surviving brothers in the Kerr family.

A party was held for Richard My on 17 November. He was leaving to carry out his military service in Noumea. S.J. Alsopp, a new Kerr Brothers' employee, left Sydney on 5 December aboard *Makambo* to work for the firm at Turtle Bay. When *Pacifique* arrived back in Sydney on 15 December she brought the news that

... there has been a bad blow in the New Hebrides on 24 November. Santo suffered badly—also Aoba and Pentecost. Several vessels lost. The *Lunawanna* fortunately was in Port Olry. She went ashore, but not much damage.

The year ended with my father 'not feeling well. Lying down most of the day'. This did not mean we had no New Year's party although it was only a small one.

What Graham Kerr did not then realise was that after his departure from Turtle Bay matters had come to a head between his brother Hugh and James Johnston. And this was the set-up that Alsopp was about to join. Did Alsopp's impending arrival have anything to do with the matter?

Hugh always operated on a short fuse. Johnston, from his letters, sounds quite of different kind of person. On 8 December he wrote to Graham Kerr from Turtle Bay:

Your brother considers that I am not up to Plantation Management and that Store work and Trading are more my forte, and there may be some truth in what he says. I am sorry to sever my connection with the firm after nearly 12 years ... I will write to you more fully next available mail. Very many thanks for all the good turns you have done me. Hoping that 1924 will bring happiness and prosperity to you all.

On 20 December Johnston wrote again to my father from Big Bay Santo where he was staying c/o J.E. Fysh. He had arrived there in *Lunawanna* a week earlier as the vessel happened to be going north. Mr Fysh was not there but hospitality was offered by his staff:

Perhaps it will be better if I offer no comment on my leaving T.B. except that I do not think your brother was ever satisfied with my work and the breach would have to come sooner or later. [He did not know what his future would be, but again thanked Graham Kerr] for your goodness to me.

Not a good ending to the year as Graham and Muriel Kerr both held Johnston, who had earlier worked for the firm at Tongoa, in high regard. Trouble was brewing between the two brothers. If only there had been other brothers. Hugh felt he had a worse job than his brother who was mostly in Sydney with his family.



Photo 26: Dalmar Studio Portrait of the Kerr Children Christmas 1923. Left to right: Katherine (6 years 2 months), Muriel (7 years 8 months), Len (about 1 year 6 months), Joyce (10 years 6 months), and Margaret (4 years 3 months). The information is written on the back of the photo card by their mother, Muriel Kerr.

There were two very competent sisters in Sydney but in those days, plantation management would never have been considered appropriate for women. Most plantations were family affairs with hospitality an important part of their role. But when D.H. and Jane Kerr were on leave in Sydney, young single men were left in charge on their own. The job was very lonely and unrewarding but somehow that problem would have to be solved.

So how was the Condominium administered during 1923?

Merton King was not having an easy time. On 2 January 1923 he asked the Western Pacific High Commissioner, Rodwell, if there was any prospect of the early return of Esperanza. He was told on 16 February that 'I fear very little prospect of the return of the Count, who in spite of arrangements as to remittance is dissatisfied.'⁵

As mentioned before salaries were at the back of most problems. De Leener, Acting Public Prosecutor to the Joint Court, protested about his salary being paid in French currency. 'During our absence on leave in Australia a year ago my entire salary was paid in useless French currency.' He had been told by Dr Borgesius that half of his salary was paid in English currency. De Leener wondered why he was singled out for different treatment.⁶ The appointment

of Surveyors was made difficult for the same reason and King said that there was every sign of a further fall in value of the franc.

The currency problem had other ramifications. On 30 January 1923 Burns Philp in Suva, alerted by its Vila manager Mr Tallantire, reported to Western Pacific High Commission that the New Hebrides Joint Regulation No. 4 of 1922, which prohibited export of silver coin, was operating adversely to British interests. The regulation was originally made to prevent French silver being shipped out of the Group. He said it was being sent away and sold as silver at substantial profit as more valuable that way than currency.

The same was not the case with sterling but the regulation also applied to British currency. 'British merchants and traders have accumulations of silver coin and no means of disposing of same to liquidate debts contracted outside the Group ... If prohibition of export continues ... British settlers, Missionaries and others will have no facilities at all to settle outside debts'. With no Postal Order or Money Order facilities in the Group, what were they to do?⁷

King did not agree, but on 9 April said the situation had now improved to some extent and if Burns Philp's Manager made another application it would 'no doubt ... be sympathetically received'. He mentioned that another firm had recently applied to export a small quantity. Perhaps that is how Graham Kerr was able to change 600 pounds in silver to draft on Sydney on 26 June as referred to earlier in the chapter. And by June the situation had improved to such an extent that all firms complained that they did not have sufficient for their requirements.

The rumoured change in the constitution of the French High Commissionership for the Pacific by the transfer of its powers and duties to the Governor-General of Indo-China had not gone unnoticed. On 29 March King sent Rodwell an extract from the *Bulletin du Commerce*, Noumea for 23 February.⁸ The article said that while the change in French leadership was still in a state of controversy 'the English are working silently on the setting up of a dominion of the Western Pacific. They are on the eve of replacing the High Commission in Fiji with a Federal government under the direction of a Governor-General selected by the Crown assisted by a Federal Board representing the territories it governs'.

The New Hebrides was included in these territories:

The English know full well that their rights [to this group] are hotly contended. It is their representatives - hundreds of Presbyterian ministers whose principal occupation, if not their exclusive one—is to make the situation of French settlers impossible, who enhance the value of the place ... What cheek!

If only the French could have read some of the damning reports from the Western Pacific High Commission regarding the Condominium and the 'white elephant' of the New Hebrides hanging round its neck and how the Condominium was bleeding the British taxpayer dry, they might have had a shock. Support for the New Hebrides Mission was indeed a devious part of British policy which Britain had to go along with to appease the Australian colonies as well as its strongly religious voting public in England. This public swallowed Presbyterian propaganda hook, line and sinker and could not be ignored. To keep France dangling was also good policy; but annexation of the Group was, from the beginning, out of the question.

Britain would, in the future, think up strategies to hand over as much responsibility as she could get away with to Australia and replace officials who knew the situation well and sympathised with the plight of British settlers in the Group with others who had no ties there. This would make it all the more easily to carry through her draconian policies.

King's confidential comment to Rodwell was that, from the extract 'it would appear that H.M.'s Government are suspected of designs of a similar nature': designs yes, but similar, no.

The following story illustrates the French had a point when they objected to New Hebrides Mission interference. The Australian Prime Minister, W.M. Hughes, on 27 March 1923 forwarded to the Colonial Office a Resolution from the Presbyterian Church of Australia urging that the New Hebrides should be taken over by Great Britain and administered as a Crown Colony.⁹ The answer was in the negative. The French would not hear of it. In the Pacific, replied the Colonial Office, 'France attached considerable

importance to the New Hebrides—hard to appreciate—based, perhaps, on sentiment’. Proximity was the more likely reason, as only 360 miles separated New Hebrides from New Caledonia but the Colonial Office did not raise that point. ‘The French attach an importance to the islands which is not perhaps easy to appreciate.’ With all the colonies she needed, Britain saw fit to close her eyes to France’s similar ambitions.

The Secretary of State for Colonies notified Rodwell on 5 April that the French Government wished to postpone the bringing into force of the Protocol of 1914 until 1 July 1923. King thought it should be ‘put into force at once without reference to the Joint Court which was still minus a President and a French Judge’.¹⁰ The lack of a French Judge would soon be fixed as M. Sachon sailed for the New Hebrides on 5 April.

But Rodwell was also told that while the Queen of Holland had no objections to the appointment of Dr Borgesius as Public Prosecutor, the French government would not agree to the appointment of de Leener as Native Advocate, giving no reasons. De Leener might well be kept on as Registrar, thought Rodwell. The French did not want a Native Advocate at any price and de Leener although well liked by the British had no powerful backers.¹¹ On 26 February the Secretary of State Colonial Office approached Rodwell about a proposed amendment to King’s Regulation No. 1 of 1913 dealing with the recruitment of women. Merton King was not overly enthusiastic. It might make recruiters

... more cautious as concerns the couples they engage. As the proposed amendment now stands ... its effect will be to withdraw the permission the Reg. now in force, gives to men, to be accompanied by their children ... Also it appears to me that, if possible, the word ‘wife’ might be qualified as to show that a ceremony with blessing of the Church is not necessarily indicated.¹²

This of course was the crux of the matter. Western style marriage did not exist in Indigenous culture. Women were possessions and marriages were temporary arrangements to suit the occasion. This everyone knew. This is what the New Hebrides Mission in its fight to bring in Western style monogamy and control over native life was dead against. Women often ran away to get out of being married against their will to New Hebrides Mission converts. King knew this happened and often pointed it out.

On the same matter King was asked for his opinion of the accusations levelled in December 1922 by the deputation of missionaries to the British Parliament—referred to in the last chapter and consisting of Reverends Frater and Bowie. King said he had not commented earlier ‘for the reason, that having reported so often, and at such length on similar charges and statements ... I did not think there was anything left for me to say’.

King dealt in general with the accusations made by Reverends Frater and Bowie: 1. Supply of alcohol to natives, 2. Irregularities in recruiting, 3. Suspension of operations (Land) of Joint Court, 4. Lack of medical care of the native population. King agreed that there was much truth in what the deputation brought forward but the ‘evil is by no means so widespread as the deputation suggests’.

Regarding 1. Supply of liquor:

... taking into consideration the melancholy fact that the operation of the law has been suspended for several years, it is ... a matter for surprise that the sale and supply of liquor to natives has not become the general practice.

The deputation had sheeted this and other abuses home to French neglect. King said he:

... held no brief for the defence of the French authorities ... but in justice to them it should be pointed out what must be known to the Presbyterian members of the deputation—that it is not the French authorities, but the Joint Court that deals, or in the past dealt, adequately or inadequately (in my humble opinion, generally inadequately) with this and other contraventions of the Condominium law.

Regarding 2. Irregularities in the recruiting of labour, King pointed out the ‘infrequency of cases of serious infraction of the law’. These are solely in connection with the engagement of women by the French.

King considered them 'inseparable from the system' both under the 'lax rules of the Convention of 1906, or of those but little more stringent, of the Protocol of 1914'. He pointed out that King's Regulation No. 1 of 1913 also left loopholes for the British. King thought the 'traffic could never be carried on in a manner entirely beyond reproach'. He warned that if the deputation wanted to make accusations against the French, he 'would suggest that they should be very well authenticated before any representations are made'.

King had tried to get his French colleague to agree to exclude the Torres Group and the island of Maewo from recruiting but could reach no agreement as the planters thought 'it likely to interfere with the development of the islands'.

Regarding 3: Suspension of operations of Joint Court, all King was prepared to say was that: 'the internal condition of the Group is undoubtedly to a large extent due to such suspension'.

Regarding 4: Lack of medical care of the native population:

The deputation is justified in some of its remarks on this subject. The Condominium government has no organised medical service... The deputation refers to 'epidemics', as though they were of common occurrence. I am happy to say that none have occurred since I have been in the Group.¹³ [King became British Resident Commission in 1907].

King then brought up the lack of authority of Mr Langridge who had introduced the deputation to the British Parliament, and who had said that

... voluntary funds obtained from British sources for hospitals etc. are much more in excess of those provided from French sources.

King's response was 'Mr Langridge, ... I believe, is an official of the General Post Office and has no personal knowledge of the New Hebrides'. He reserved his strongest criticism for Reverend Frater who made the following 'grave statement': 'Numerous and flagrant as were the abuses in pre-Condominium days, matters went steadily from bad to worse under the Joint control'.

King remarked that

... it is surprising that a man whose life is—or is supposed to be—devoted to spreading the Truth, should make such a statement as this ... Even in its most limited application, Mr Frater's remark is unjustified; and taken in its broadest sense it is, I submit, quite indefensible.¹⁴

These were strong words indeed from the man whose tact in his relations with his French opposite numbers and whose self-control in an always delicate situation were probably the reason the Condominium went ahead as well as it did. They should have been taken to heart but Colonial Office policy being what it was there was little hope.

This is the background for the deep resentment felt by both British and French settlers for the continual strife, kept on the boil by the New Hebrides Mission and its supporters to get what they wanted and their dismissal of the French and anybody else who defied their Divine Right to Rule the Indigenous population of the New Hebrides for what they considered to be their own good. It is no wonder the French dug their heels in and refused to conform.

Trouble with salaries for Condominium officials continued. Should they be paid a bonus? King stressed that this would not be because of the reduced value of the franc but because of the high cost of living. He did not think the French would ever admit the right of a British Condominium official to preferential treatment. He thought that the only solution would be to ask the French 'to agree to a general and provisional increase in the Condominium supplement'. If the franc improved in value, problems would be eased but King did not see that happening at present.¹⁵

The Forward Estimate of Condominium Expenditure for 1924 did not help. Expenditure was estimated at 35,604 pounds, giving a deficit of 11,084 pounds. The British Treasury told the Colonial Office 30 April that:

... as from 1 Jan 1924, only with extreme reluctance and in the most extreme circumstances, could they contemplate a grant-in-aid of Condominium expenditure.¹⁶

It looked as if the deficit would have to be made good by more extremely unpopular local taxation.

There was also trouble with regard to land belonging to the Commonwealth Government in the New Hebrides, which it had earlier handed over to Burns Philp and Company to administer. To King's knowledge only four of the settlers sponsored by Burns Philp were still there and they were not prosperous but still struggling. The land of the failed settlers was still under Burns Philp's control. The New Hebrides British Association had drawn King's attention to this land and said it should be released for sale.

When King drew Rodwell's attention to this, the latter advised the Secretary of State Colonial Office that from his knowledge of Messrs Burns, Philp and Co. Ltd. 'I am inclined to agree with Mr King that anyone bound to that firm in business of any sort can do little better than struggle. Burns Philp and Co.'s methods leave very little margin for the small or middle man to become prosperous.'¹⁷ Supported by the Commonwealth Government and the New Hebrides Mission, Burns Philp was in a very privileged position.

By May the very competent de Leener was putting his future on the line. At present, acting as Public Prosecutor to the still not functioning Joint Court, King thought de Leener should be offered the new post of Registrar of Titles as well as his substantive one of Registrar, as the French Government had rejected his nomination as Native Advocate. De Leener wanted to be put on the same footing as the English Judge. He wished to receive English currency when on leave and enough English currency, at par, to enable him to pay for his son's education in Sydney. No reasons were given by the French Resident as to why de Leener was *persona non grata* to the French.¹⁸ Not prepared to alter his stance de Leener would resign later in the year.

By 28 May the Secretary of State Colonial Office was hopeful that:

As the French Judge sailed [from Marseilles] on 15 April it should be possible for the Joint Court to re-assemble under the Presidency of Dr Borgesium in a week or two so ... the argument for postponement (of proclamation of Protocol of 1914)... cannot now in any circumstances be regarded as valid.

Monsieur Sachon, the new French Judge arrived in Vila on 14 June and the Acting President, proposed that the Joint Court should open for business on 26 June. It only remained for the real President, Count Buena de Esperanza, to put in an appearance. But on 21 May King telegraphed Rodwell that

... a French settler just returned from France ... has informed one of the staff of the Residency that he was informed at the French Colonial Ministry in Paris by an official of some standing, that the French government did not intend the Protocol of 1914 to be put into force, because it was extremely unpopular and quite unworkable ... It was not the intention of the French government that the Joint Court should adjudicate on land claims ... Esperanza might return to the New Hebrides, but that was all he would do.

King added that it may be regarded as just gossip, but he thought it should be taken into account regarding the postponements.¹⁹

Looking back on Graham Kerr's growing interest in France at this time and what he would do in the future, I wish that he had been able to see clearly what the French Ministry for Colonies was trying to prevent—the proper adjudication of land claims—and how it would eventually affect him.

King pursued the subject of paying a bonus to the British staff of the Condominium throughout the year, referring to the raised cost of living as well as the problem of the devalued franc, 80F to 1 pound sterling in 1923. The Colonial Office was forced to concede that British staff members were 'very poorly paid' and a bonus was necessary to place them on the same footing as officers in the Solomons.²⁰

The New Hebrides was indeed the black sheep of the British family of Pacific colonies. But then it was not a real colony, nor was it a British Protectorate, but a unique experiment, a Condominium of

two powers, neither of which was prepared to fund adequately the necessary services in a place that did not belong exclusively to either of them.

An Imperial Conference on the New Hebrides was to take place in October, to follow the one held in 1921; the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand again to attend. The Secretary of State Colonial Office told the Governor-General of Australia on 25 June 1923 that the position of the New Hebrides was so unsatisfactory that the possibility of some radical change must be seriously considered:

At the present time, the Secretary of State Foreign Office does not consider it opportune to suggest exchange of territory. So if exchange and partition are ruled out—all that remains is to bring the Protocol of 1914 into force.²¹

Since 1920 British exports had remained stationary, French ones have doubled in five years and are now nearly five times the value and six times the bulk of the British. British exports are almost entirely confined to copra but French ones include cotton, cocoa, coffee and maize. This increase put down to the fact that the French are more successful in getting labour which is a very scarce commodity.

On 25 May King reported to Rodwell that M. Lançon, a French settler on Epi, arrived in Vila on 14 May with 60 Annamite labourers to work his Epi plantation. And again on 4 September he reported the arrival of 850 Indo-Chinese labourers in Noumea from Tonkin; 220 to remain in New Caledonia and the rest to come to the New Hebrides; 164 of these for service in Vila, the balance to French settlers in the north of the Group. *Ballande et Cie* of Noumea were the agents.

Interestingly King was asked by a British settler, A.D. Fraser of Epi, what his position would be if he were to obtain a gang of coolies from Ballande. King told him he could not prevent it but no indentures could be recognised by British authority. He considered it very likely that other British settlers would follow suit.²²

As mentioned earlier the New Hebrides British Association held its Annual Meeting at T.C. Stephen's plantation at South Santo on 22 October. The meeting was attended by D.H. Kerr. A resolution was passed for the framing of uniform regulations governing labour and recruiting in the New Hebrides covering both British and French settlers. When forwarding a copy of the resolution to Rodwell on 15 November Merton King remarked that 'as far as my knowledge goes the Resolution expresses the views of the majority of the British lay element in the Group'.²³ Once again he pointed out the disadvantages under which they operated.

If I am not misinformed, the New Zealand government has recently introduced Chinese coolie labour for work on the plantations of the mandated territory of Samoa and, on the principle that what is good for Samoa can do no harm to the New Hebrides; I would ask that the same concession could be extended to this Group.²⁴

To which the following reply from the British Prime Minister would be delivered on 24 July 1924: 'I am not prepared ... to sanction any modification of the attitude hitherto taken up ... on this matter'. In this regard, British Colonial Office policy towards New Hebrides was set in concrete. Come what may, King in his quiet but persistent way, used every occasion that presented itself to point out the dire situation for British planters.

Following a delegation earlier in the year from the Presbyterian Church to the Australian Prime Minister which called for all foreign indentured labour to be forbidden, King replied on 11 September²⁵ that he considered the fears of the Presbyterian deputation to be

... to a great extent groundless...Development of the Group is only possible with a good and reliable supply of labour, and as a reliable supply is not available from local sources, it follows that unless supplemented from outside, progress will not be attained. In this respect the French settler undoubtedly has a great advantage over the British.²⁶

The Indigenous New Hebrideans were not asked their opinion of outside labour being introduced but then they were not asked their opinion on anything. As far their white rulers were concerned they

were not capable of having opinions of their own. The New Hebrides Mission was right to query the question but their reasons were open to question. They wanted to control the Islanders themselves and what they were doing in destroying the Indigenous ethos and trying to impose Western religious beliefs, without accompanying them with the necessary secular work-ethic, was equally disastrous.

King was personally deeply interested in the decline in numbers of the Indigenous population. In his report on New Hebrides for 1923 he quoted 'the late Dr Rivers, than whom none was more competent to speak'. Dr William Rivers just before his death in 1922 edited a book called *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia*, in which he placed 'special emphasis on the psychological factor'. King then said that River's

... attributed the decline of the Melanesian population to this: 'That the people have been deprived of nearly all that gives interest to their lives' and this loss of interest has been brought about by the 'unintelligent and indiscriminating action (of Europeans) towards native institutions'.²⁷

The root cause of racial decay in the Pacific, King put down to 'the lack of occupation and consequent loss of ambition and of interest in life'. He had discussed the matter with Dr Davies of the John Paton Memorial Hospital.²⁸

One hundred years on I know I am treading on delicate ground. The white 'invasion' of the New Hebrides and other Pacific groups in the eyes of the colonisers was done for the good of the Indigenous people as well as themselves, and it must be stressed that all colonisers were not necessarily villains—they were men of their time.

And not all Islanders had given up the struggle either. On 31 July 1923, the mutilated body of a New Zealander, R.O.D. Clapcott settled at Tasmalum south Santo, was found by another British planter. *Euphrosyne*, with E.G. Seagoe Acting Head of British Constabulary in charge, was sent to investigate and returned with 18 natives headed by a man called Ronovura, who up till then had been regarded as a 'harmless semi-insane visionary'. He had told his followers that 'he would bring a big ship that would take away the white men and leave them, the natives, to enjoy the land undisturbed'. Seagoe thought that Clapcott was the first white man murdered, because he was close at hand.²⁹ It was thought that R. Watson and his wife were the next on the list to be killed.

Naturally, although this indicated there were some Islanders ready to fight for ownership of their own land, it caused great consternation amongst the white settlers in that part of Santo. The consternation amongst whites was so great that the Secretary of State Colonial Office brought up the possibility of an Australian warship visiting the Group. The Joint Naval Commission, whose job it would normally have been, had lapsed during the War and not yet been reconstituted. He hoped that Australia would take on the job 'without expense to H.M.'s Government'.

The visit did not take place because on 12 October King reported that the 'French Government yacht has just returned from Santo and reports that all is quiet'.³⁰ *La Victoire* with a detachment of British and French Constabulary had gone to Santo after settlers had reported receiving threatening messages from Ronovura's followers and returned with 'confidence apparently restored'. There is no mention of Clapcott's murder in Graham Kerr's diary so I presume that the Turtle Bay area was not implicated.

Six of the Islanders brought to Vila were sentenced to death and six others to penal servitude. King thought that unless the executions were carried out in public—forbidden under British rules—they would have no effect on the native mind. The settlers on Santo agreed with him and sent him a petition to that effect. The British Judge, R.S. de Vere, however thought that three of the death sentences should be commuted: he and the Acting President, Dr Borgesius, stated 'most emphatically that they had never been officially consulted by either Resident Commissioner'. This was really a job for the Joint Court but it seemed that both the Residents were trying to deal with the problem between them and it would not be the end of the matter.

To return to another delicate subject—that of a French Government Agent for Tanna—Rodwell on 19 July approved the appointment of Albert Salles 'a man of good reputation, education and health'

to the post by Jules Repiquet, the French High Commissioner. It now remained to see how the New Hebrides Mission would react as Tanna had no French settlers.

The Mission was not the only one given to open disapproval of Condominium arrangements. Dr Borgesius, in his capacity of Acting President of the Joint Court, reported to both Resident Commissioners the 'singularly indiscreet utterances of the French Commandant of Constabulary', M. Berthault, regarding the jurisdiction of the Joint Court over French citizens, which meant 'that he could not be relied upon as a trustworthy agent of the Condominium law'. Ever discreet, King left it to his French colleague to 'deal with him as he deserves'.³¹

It was unfortunate that both Merton King and Jules Repiquet who had known each other for many years and worked well together were at this critical period coming to the end of their terms of office. On 13 August Repiquet advised Rodwell of his approaching departure from Noumea on sick leave before taking up the governorship of the French colony of Réunion in the Indian Ocean. M. D'Arboussier the French Resident was to act in his place as French High Commissioner while M. de la Vaissière acted as French Resident.

Repiquet, who had been French Resident in Vila from 1913 to 1918 when he became Governor of New Caledonia and French High Commissioner, left Vila on 15 August. Thomas Johnston, British Vice-Consul in Noumea wrote to Rodwell attesting to 'the very cordial relations which have always existed between Governor Repiquet and my predecessors and myself'.³² Graham Kerr, in deep trouble, would later ask for Repiquet's assistance when the latter made a short visit to Noumea.

As regards Merton King, Rodwell told him on 3 July that the Secretary of State Colonial Office and the Lords of the Treasury 'have sanctioned the retention for a further period of one year of your services as Resident Commissioner in the New Hebrides'. King, who would turn 70 in July 1924, was due for retirement but his long and valuable experience of New Hebridean affairs was recognised and Rodwell wanted him to stay around after G. Smith-Rewse was appointed in his place. 'The wisest course would be to replace him soon at Vila but to retain him, if he is willing, at Suva in an advisory capacity for a year or so until his successor has learned the ropes'.³³ The only local candidate for King's position seemed to be Smith-Rewse.

The official French proclamation of the Protocol of 1914 finally took place on 20 August. It may well have been delayed because of the departure of Repiquet and of D'Arboussier to act temporarily in his place.

There was no fixed date to commence the urgent business of those unopposed land claim cases which were already registered. Back in 1913 the Kerr family land-claims had been registered along with many others. They would now have to be done all over again, if and when the Joint Court opened for business. After being registered they had to wait a year for counter-claims to be made. Borgesius told King that he was considering fixing November 24 as the 'date on which the reception of land registration applications is to be resumed'.³⁴ The French Resident was also advised of this date and he told Borgesius that he was 'cabling for instructions'.

The French were past masters at the art of delay. I am sure Graham Kerr did not realise this. The French side of the Condominium was in the hands of the Minister for Colonies and the Director of the Board of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in faraway Paris. On the level that Graham Kerr communicated with his many good French friends in the Group these delay-tactics would not have been obvious and they as settlers would not have known French Government intentions either.

With the resignation of de Leener, Registrar and Acting Public Prosecutor to the Joint Court, and his departure from Vila for Sydney on 8 October 1923, King—still awaiting the arrival of Esperanza—told Rodwell that if that does not happen 'the Joint Court will have to close its doors again'. And the French were still finding excuses to delay the appointment of a Native Advocate.³⁵

All this delay in filling the vacant positions in the Joint Court caused King on 30 November to put the matter bluntly to Rodwell:

I have reported the mischievous effect which the prolonged suspension of the magisterial work was having on the internal state of the Group. Since these representations were made, the prospect ... has grown darker ... The settlers' hopes of a final settlement of

their land affairs, are gradually fading away, while the law-breaker, knowing the executive is powerless against him, continues his operations unchecked.³⁶

Selling of alcohol to the natives is 'becoming painfully prevalent' He begged 'most earnestly' for the reopening of the Court to hear land claims.

Prolongation of the existing state of affairs cannot but accentuate the feeling prevailing in the Group and play into the hands of those whose aim is to bring a speedy end to the present form of administration.

And that would include practically everybody including the Kerrs. It needs to be realised that nobody in the Group had a valid title to their land until it was finally registered in the Joint Court. King was fighting for the retention of the Condominium to which he had devoted so many difficult years.

Before the year ended, British Judge de Vere would have a falling-out with Merton King which revealed the dire situation in just about every aspect of Condominium government of the Group. De Vere on 8 November sent a letter to Borgesius, Acting President Joint Court, and to Merton King which was to be directed to Rodwell and the Secretary of State Colonial Office. King forwarded it with the comment that it was 'on the subject of the misdeeds of the Condominium Government and myself in particular'.

One of the interesting accusations of de Vere concerned the position of Mr Frank Wallace who occupied a room in the British Residency, adjoining King's. As agent of the Federal Government of Australia, de Vere submitted that 'he ... should have no connection whatever with the British side of the Administration of the New Hebrides, which as far I am aware, is in no way subordinate to the Australian government ... Mr Wallace is generally credited with possessing an undue influence in matters concerning the British side of the Government'. King in his reply of 13 December regarding Wallace said that the above 'existed only in the imagination of Mr de Vere'. There did, nevertheless, seem to be increasing intrusion in Condominium affairs from Australia which, after all, as de Vere wrote, was 'in no way subordinate to the Australian government'.³⁷

King on the point of retiring would be backed by both Western Pacific High Commission and Colonial Office but a gradual slackening off of purely English officials in favour of Australian influences would gradually become evident. It was no secret to both British and French settlers that the Commonwealth Government, Burns Philp and the New Hebrides Mission exerted undue influence in the Group.

Smith-Rewse was being considered for the post of next British Resident, despite the fact he had very little French. The British Assistant-Resident Commissioner, R.L.P. Browne, was being transferred to Cyprus, and on 23 December King recommended the appointment of E.A.G. Seago in his place. Seago 'has resided in the New Hebrides for more than 20 years and consequently has a thorough knowledge of the Group and its people, both white and coloured. He has also a very workable knowledge of the French language'.

Seago was the obvious choice. Why then did Rodwell reply to a Colonial Office telegram that he knew 'of nobody locally for post of Assistant'? Did Seago's long sojourn with its knowledge of, and sympathy for, what was not being done to aid British settlers have anything to do with it? Was this part of a new British strategy to deal with the pestiferous New Hebrides?

Endnotes

- 1 I do not know when someone saw fit to report that we had a black man living at Kermadec. My father was told Tom Poleman had to leave and managed to get his old job as steward on *Pacifique* back so that he could visit his 'family' when the ship was in port. Sometime in the late 1920s Tom died as the result of a tram accident. He would have been subject to the insulting regulation of having to wear an armband indicating that he was a Pacific Islander and could not be supplied with drink.
- 2 On 18 Feb King reported to Rodwell that a heavy gale had struck the northern islands. 'Judging by large numbers of floating coconut palms and other trees encountered near Malekula and Epi, they must have borne the brunt.' He found out later that the western and southern parts of Epi and south of Malekula had suffered the most. See WPHC 421/1923.
- 3 George Morrison Neil came to New Hebrides circa 1895 where he had a station on Sakau. Neil married Annie—illegitimate daughter of Carl Cronstedt by an Indigenous woman from Tongoa—by whom he had three children, Roy, Walter and a girl René.
- 4 Kerr Bros had many French clients who used the firm to sell their produce.
- 5 WPHC 159/1923.
- 6 WPHC 135/1923, De Leener to Rodwell, 3 Jan 1923.
- 7 WPHC 145/1923. Includes the next two quotations.
- 8 WPHC 81/1923. Given in rough translation.
- 9 C.O. 537/964, p. 35.
- 10 WPHC 503/1923.
- 11 WPHC 751/1923.
- 12 WPHC 937/1923.
- 13 See WPHC 1095/1923, King to Rodwell 16 April 1923. The British hospital on Iririki was aided by a grant from the British Govt., fees paid by patients, donations etc. The balance provided by the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. Three hospitals established by the New Hebrides Mission at Tanna, Wala and Hog Harbour which had not functioned for some years although King thought the Tanna one about to reopen. There were two French hospitals; one at Vila and another very small concern at Segond Channel. The Vila one was supported by the French Government plus fees from patients. A small allowance was allowed from by Condominium funds to the officer in charge of the Vila Hospital for acting as the Medical and Sanitary Adviser and to the Santo officer to allow him to attend to native patients.
- 14 WPHC 305/1923, King to Rodwell, (Confidential), 16 April 1923.
- 15 WPHC 257/1923, King to Rodwell, 17 April 1923.
- 16 WPHC 1453 /1923.
- 17 WPHC 90/1923.
- 18 WPHC 1396/1923.
- 19 WPHC 939/1923.
- 20 WPHC 1825/1923.
- 21 See C.O. 537/964, Secret, Future of the New Hebrides, pp. 1–65. This very important record gives a resume of New Hebridean affairs from 1913–1921 from the British official point of view and is necessary reading for anyone wanting to really understand the situation.
- 22 WPHC 2385/1923. See also WPHC 2657/1923, King to Rodwell, 9 Nov 1923.
- 23 WPHC 3146/1923.
- 24 WPHC 3147/1923.
- 25 WPHC 2022/1923, Sec. of State C.O. to Rodwell, 17 July 1923.
- 26 In Australia it was never accepted that the vast undertaking of bringing New Hebrideans to Queensland to work on the sugar plantations had permanently denuded Islander numbers in New Hebrides.
- 27 WPHC 1573/1924, King to Rodwell 27 May 1924. Dr Rivers was important to the author and she intended to write more about him but did not.
- 28 WPHC 305/1923, King to Rodwell, 12 Oct 1923.
- 29 WPHC 2608/1923, King to Rodwell 14 Sept 1923 for full report.
- 30 WPHC 2308/1923. See also WPHC 2630/1923.
- 31 WPHC 2098/1923. See also WPHC 2935/1923, King to Rodwell 13 Nov 1923. 'Mr Berthault, chief of the

French Police openly proclaimed before witnesses ... that he had no intention of bringing French citizens before the Joint Court whatever their offences might be'.

32 WPHC 1989/1923.

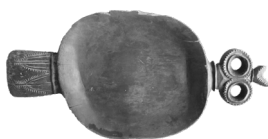
33 WPHC 3523/1922.

34 WPHC 1497/1923.

35 WPHC 2092/1923, King to Rodwell, 18 Aug 1923. Dr. Davies, Medical Superintendent, Paton Memorial Hospital and Dr. Madelaine, Condominium Medical Officer, 'have been good enough to undertake the duties [of Native Advocate] until some other arrangement is made'.

36 WPHC 78/1923.

37 WPHC 2935/1923.



Chapter 6 1924: Total Failure of the Condominium Seen to be Not Far Off

Graham Kerr began the year at home in Sydney. In January, with an eye to the fact of his fast-growing French connection, he engaged Louis Vautier who lived at Blackheath to deal with French clients and their business.

He was still trying to get satisfaction and full payment for Annie Petersen's Vysuck Estate for which a claim had been put into the Joint Court in 1913. While still holding the land the British Treasury would not pay up until ownership between Annie Petersen and the French government was decided. The matter could have been settled as far back as 1906 when his Solicitor, Edward Jacomb, asked time and time again for settlement with no result.

On 2 June 1924 T.E. Fell, Acting High Commissioner in Rodwell's absence, told the Secretary of State Colonial Office that 'the position is the same today as it was on 25 July 1923' which was the last time the question of the Vysuck Estate had been raised. The money due on this valuable water-front estate was all that its owner Annie Petersen had to live on. If the Colonial Office would not pay for all of it, why did they not release the unused part for there were plenty of interested buyers? No wonder Graham Kerr became more and more frustrated.

I think it was due to a political stand-off between England and France with England refusing to get tough where the rights of British subjects were concerned. The matter was complicated by the fact that Annie had a Swedish father and an Indigenous mother although her guardians were British subjects.

Kerr Brothers' business was going ahead with markets for cocoa not difficult to find and the first cotton from Turtle Bay plantation reaching Sydney via *Pacifique* to be shipped to Liverpool.

Messageries Maritimes was increasing its shipping and on 7 March my parents went to a Ball on board their newest liner *Céphée* which was docked at 2 Dawes Point. My father was most impressed and it was on this vessel that he and my mother would travel to Europe in 1928 after the deal was cinched in 1927 to sell Turtle Bay to - *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* (CGFH).

The offer he made to Ballandes about selling Turtle Bay Plantation and trying to get others to sell had not fallen on fallow ground. Ballandes had a permanent seat on the Board of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* (SFNH) in Paris and hence the ear of the French Government. Other British planters were getting restive under the raw deal dished out to them by British Authority among them the Thomas Brothers of Hog Harbour Plantation. On 18 March 1924 Graham Kerr wrote to Theo Thomas that he understood that they would be willing to take 10,000 pounds for all their property. He said if that was the case, he would be glad to be given 'a clear three months option' so that the necessary financial arrangements could be made. In the meantime he needed all particulars, including approximate areas planted and not planted and if any titles are seriously contested by the French Company or others.

It was not that he was trying to buy more property for Kerr Brothers in the New Hebrides, on the contrary. He knew all the disaffected British settlers and with his French connection he was the obvious person to act as vendor. Perhaps the Kerr family would even be able to retire from business, not just from the New Hebrides itself. Graham Kerr at this time was in his 51st year and his sisters were older, so retirement was a real option.

Things were not going smoothly between Graham and his brother Hugh. They did not see eye to eye about the people they employed on the plantation, for example James Johnston. Graham Kerr told

his brother if he didn't like Johnston it was up to him to get rid of him, but he needed to know that he would always have to make a good many allowances for the right men are very hard to get.¹ There had even been talk of one or the other of the brothers leaving the business.

On 26 March Graham Kerr wrote: 'None of us is indispensable ... I certainly am not and can make mistakes like other mortals'. He had spoken up for Johnston 'as he found him'. Another employee, Whitford, was also in contention, 'Why keep any of them on ... if useless. You are in charge there—it is for you to see that the work is done'.

On 10 April Graham Kerr was in the news in a letter published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.² The letter followed some very derogatory articles against the French following a deputation to the Prime Minister, Mr Bruce, by the Foreign Missions Committee of the Presbyterian Church.

In regard to the conditions existing in the New Hebrides under the Anglo-French Condominium there is much room for condemnation but the exaggerated statements of the ... deputation to the Prime Minister will not improve matters. These statements about French treatment of natives are the usual mission propaganda carried on for years. It is true you can always find instances of bad treatment by both French and British, but to make the sweeping statements of the deputation is ridiculous ... The wild statement ... that the deliberate policy of the French in the New Hebrides appears to be the extinction of the native race, hardly requires comment.

He went on to criticise joint control as being too unwieldy 'with its duplication of departments—British Court, French Court, Joint Court under a Spanish President, and so on'.

Partition had been suggested but my father did not think that would work as British and French settlers were to be found on all of the bigger islands. He finished his letter 'speaking without any prejudice, the preponderating interest in the group is that of the French'.

He was backed by Merton King who on 28 May wrote directly to the Secretary of State Colonial Office and included three newspaper articles, as well as Graham Kerr's letter, which all brought up the same point that Kerr had said 'hardly requires comment':

Touching on the question of the introduction of Indo-Chinese Labour, the deputation appears to have delivered itself of the extraordinary statement; one that reflects little credit on those responsible for it, that 'the deliberate policy of the French in the New Hebrides appears to be the extinction of the native race with a view to the substitution of foreign indentured labour from French possessions'. [This is] entirely devoid of foundation ... and were it not for the publicity that has been given to it in the Australian press, might well have been left unnoticed. It is however, so unjustified and constitutes such a cruel slur on a people, who, in the main, are as humane and honourable in their dealings with the natives as are their British fellow settlers, that I cannot allow it to pass without recording a most emphatic protest.³

These are strong words indeed. The Governor-General of Australia told the acting Western Pacific High Commissioner on 2 August, that, 'as desired by your Excellency I am bringing the contents of [Merton King's] despatch to the notice of my Prime Minister for any action he may deem necessary'.⁴ With the Australian Government and the New Hebrides Mission working hand-in-glove that would be nothing. Once again the Colonial Office refused to take the necessary strong steps to curb the excesses of the New Hebrides Mission.

It was now time for Graham Kerr to return to the New Hebrides and in particular to Tongoa where Everard Fox was now in charge. From a letter to Hugh of 16 January 1924 he wrote: 'We are trying to sell or lease Tongoa. It is certainly no use closing it while it is paying its way. Failing a sale or a good lease the only thing is to keep it going. A couple of months at Turtle Bay would be a good thing for Fox during the hurricane season. He can turn his hand to anything, making tanks, general repairs of any kind—things that are not of a continuous nature and often very difficult to get done ... He could also get into the run of the *White Heather*—take her to Vila if saleable there, or otherwise use her as pro-

posed'. Graham Kerr thought that Turtle Bay and Tongoa ought to help each other and if Tongoa was sold or leased, Fox and family could go to Turtle Bay. 'At present we are tied to Tongoa but hope to quit it, although it has always made a good return on the capital value, at any rate until the blow of 1922.'

He left on *Makambo* on 2 July. En route he wrote to Hugh Kerr in Santo with whom he was still on prickly terms, as every time he visited the plantation the books and the store were in a hopeless mess. 'Nobody has yet been found to deal with the books etc'. Crops are very necessary 'but you will generally find that efficiency in other things (e.g. accounts) goes with efficiency in other things. Proper accounts are part of the efficiency of a plantation'.

The new-comer, S.J. Alsopp, seemed to be shaping well and they were trying to get another person to help with the work. Graham Kerr was 'waiting on a letter from London re a Gordon Dryer to deal with the cocoa' which was then selling at 45 pounds per ton.

He reached Vila on 11 July and took a room at the Hotel Moderne run by Mme. Tarras. Kerr Brothers House was leased to Emile My and Graham visited him.

On Bastille Day, 14 July 1924, a holiday for the French he 'went to the French Residency reception at 10.30am. There is a fete on this afternoon in the Residency grounds'. He went up for a while and then went to Burns Philp and Company's for tennis finishing up the evening at Ernest Reid's place⁵.

He was waiting for *White Heather* with Fox in charge to arrive from Turtle Bay intending to travel with him to Tongoa to see how he was managing there. He hoped to take Fox in *White Heather* to a good many places in the vicinity where 'he should be able to pick up business with a small craft... Fox with two boys should get her to pay well', especially if he could get her converted to run on kerosene which was cheaper.

While waiting, my father drew up a new lease of K.B. House and Store to run for three years from 1 August. He also went across to Iririki to play tennis at the British Residency where he made the acquaintance of Mr and Mrs Smith-Rewse, the new British Resident.

White Heather arrived in Vila on 21 July and Graham Kerr delivered the copra she had brought to Burns Philp and asked Louis Fricotte a boat builder to carry out some work on her. This was finished by 25 July with Graham trying to beg borrow or steal a dinghy for her. Mr My came to the rescue and lent him one while a new one was being built in Noumea. She was then loaded with the cargo brought down by *Makambo* and left for Tongoa on 26 July.

Graham Kerr waited in Vila for mail by *Pacifique*, now due in port. He finally left for Tongoa on 30 July on Ballandes' *St Michel*. He advised D.H. Kerr:

I shall be returning to Sydney by the next *Pacifique*. There are special reasons. [Muriel Kerr was expecting another child in September.] Otherwise I would go on to Santo from Tongoa. I will be at Santo for the end of October, so if you want to get away then you could.

Makambo left for Sydney on 17 July going via Tanna where she was to land the Presbyterian missionaries who had been embarked on her trip to the north of the Group for their annual Synod.

While Graham Kerr was in Vila the *Messageries Maritimes* ship, *Antinous*, arrived from Noumea. He remarked in a letter to the Sydney office that she would be there for about a week

... to load 900 or 1000 tons. From a business point of view that is absurd, but it is political. Her cost lying here will come to nearly as much as her freight from here. As far as Burns Philp is concerned it is an absolute absurdity, taking copra out of *Makambo* on her way to Sydney, to put it ashore here and then load up again to French steamers. By the time it is put ashore here and reloaded again, counting labour, lighterage etc. it would run into the best part of 40/- a ton ... Transshipping large quantities in Sydney, it could be done for about 5/- a ton. B. P.'s present methods cannot go on. If their steamer was not running to Sydney it would be a different matter.

Messageries Maritimes was now making a big effort to advertise that she could deliver copra direct to Europe from the islands, running vessels from Marseilles to Noumea via Saigon and New Hebrides

and returning home via Panama. Burns Philp must have found it paid to off-load copra in Vila onto a French vessel, rather than take it to its home port of Sydney, or it certainly would not have done so.

St Michel with Mr and Mrs Ballande and the Director of their New Hebrides business, *Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, Mr. Albert Bonneaud aboard reached Tongoa on 1 August, where Graham Kerr disembarked. They were on their way to Santo where CFNH had another branch at the Second Channel.

After dealing with the newly-arrived goods for the Tongoa store, Graham Kerr prepared *White Heather* for a trading trip round the islands in the vicinity of Tongoa with Mr Fox and three natives as crew. Their first stop was Epi where they visited a native village called Bagota. Graham 'arranged with the Chief to come back in a month's time when they are to have copra ready'.

Some Islanders were now trading for themselves and settlers were beginning to vie for their trade. Graham Kerr was very pleased with the way *White Heather* sailed after her repairs. They also visited Big Bay, Epi where Mr Fox visited the village of Ngola. Some islanders came on board and bought trade. He had thought to go on to Paama and Lopevi but the wind was against them so they returned to Tongoa.

Next day he took Fox to see Kerr property at Pakoa which he did not regard as satisfactory and was considering selling. While at Tongoa he visited the Neils and the Newmans and on his last afternoon 'went up to Reverend Michelsen's to afternoon tea'. In his personal relations with members of the New Hebrides Mission he was always polite. It was what some of them did to cause unnecessary trouble in the Group that bothered him.

Next day 14 August he left on *White Heather* for Vila, going via Émaé 'to see natives and make arrangements about calling. Saw Albert Florens at Roxburgh's; called at Sasaki and were going to Makalla? but most of the natives from there are said to be away up North after pigs. Ran on to Makura and anchored for the night. The natives at Makura are about the best and cleanest I have seen in New Hebrides ... Did some business and arranged to call regularly'. Trading on their own behalf seemed to give a boost to the psyche of these beleaguered people as his uncle Captain Donald Macleod had also found decades earlier.

From there they continued to 'Mataso and anchored on the beach on the East Side. Went ashore and arranged with the natives to call regularly'. Next stop was Emao where regular visits were also arranged and the trade boxes from *White Heather* were taken ashore and some business was done. The same thing happened at Pele and Nguna.

The wind was against them trying to enter Havannah Harbour, so they headed for Vila instead, meeting 'a very nasty sea between Tuka Tuka and round Devil's Point'. Graham Kerr was delighted with the way *White Heather* behaved and the way Fox ran her. 'Fox and I went ashore at Vila to dinner and I took up my quarters at the hotel.'

He collected the mail that Mr My was holding for him and was assured that all was going well at home. While awaiting *Pacifique* he went with Fox to see the new British Resident, Mr Smith-Rewse, and next day, 23 August,

... wrote letters to the British Commissioner in confirmation of interview yesterday re duty on cartridges used for shooting parakeets in cocoa; duty on dynamite used for blowing out passages; re recommending the institution of an annual license fee for traders; re trouble amongst the Tongoa natives, and offering the *White Heather* as a suitable craft for one of the Government Agents.⁶

While in Vila he wrote to the Sydney office on 18 August that although *Makambo* was due in from the north on her way back to Sydney, he would wait for *Pacifique* and go via Noumea so that he could deal with such matters as French cash 'so that later on when I am going to Santo, I can go by *Makambo* and land right at Turtle Bay instead of Second Channel'.

He asked them 'to be on the lookout for a young fellow' whom he could take to the plantation to

... teach him the run of the books and looking after the Store. I am afraid that T.B. [Turtle Bay] is terribly short-handed with over a hundred labour to look after besides books and store ... I say it is a losing game to run short-handed. One hundred labour

should have at least two outside men. It is quite easy to lose more than 2 men's wages with 100 labour, for want of overseeing.

As far as Tongoa was concerned, *Notou* was due there shortly and there should be 8 to 10 tons copra to give them. He:

... put [Fox] onto a simpler way of doing things. They were a bit tied in a knot for want of a few explanations. The Fox family seem a very decent lot. The eldest girl looks after the store. Mrs Fox makes dresses and bread for the store and Leslie [the son] gives a hand.

Graham Kerr told the office about his and Fox's trip around the islands in *White Heather*.

Fox does splendidly with the engine and with so little benzene ... she is a peach ... I think Mr Fox will do very well when he gets established in the running. The trouble will probably be that she—*White Heather* will be too small. I am hoping that we may be able to sell her to the government. No doubt she is a beautiful thing and would suit Nicol fine. [Nicol was J.M. Nicol, Condominium Government Agent on Tanna as well as being his brother-in-law].

He finished his letter: 'Hands badly burnt with sun and are swollen and shaky. Hope you can read this'. With Celtic skin suited to the far north of Scotland, he did not fare well in New Hebrides where black skin was far more suitable.

On 1 September D.H. Kerr wrote to him from Turtle Bay that he had just returned from a recruiting trip with 12 mostly two-year Labour from Malekula:

It is a case of keeping [*Lunawanna*] going all the time if we are to keep the plantation up to the mark. We have 257 acres of cocoa now planted. This will take some keeping clean ... It should easily give 100 tons per year. Should we be able to get outside Labour, this is the paying crop. We could plant a few thousand acres if a plentiful supply of Labour. I do not think it would be hard to form a company with plenty of capital if there was an assured supply of Labour.

While awaiting *Pacifique*, Graham Kerr—always very sociable—on 26 August:

... rode to Devils Point with a party, Mrs Seagoe, Mrs Adams [sic], Miss de Gayon, Miss Leconte, Mr Smith-Rewse and myself. Took lunch with us. Had a swim. Back before dark.⁷

On 1 September he 'gave a dinner at Hotel Moderne ... in return for much hospitality received in Vila. Mr and Mrs My; Mr and Mrs Tallantire [he was Burns Philp's Vila Manager at that time]; Mr and Mrs Seagoe; Mr Mayet; Mr Bell [W. Lockhart Bell—a close family friend]; and myself'.

The next evening he spent with F.E. Wallace, who was his solicitor as well as being the Representative of the Australian Commonwealth Government in Vila.

On 4 September he left for Sydney on *Pacifique* anxious to get home in time for the birth of the new baby. Held up in Noumea he eventually got a quicker passage to Sydney on *St Vincent de Paul* on 10 September.

He did not know until he reached Sydney that his father-in-law, Sydney Hutton Manager of the N.S.W. State Brickworks, had died on 8 September aged 60 from a heart attack so he was not coming home to a happy household.

The news of her father's death had been kept from my mother but an aunt, thinking she knew, commiserated with her on her loss and the shock brought on premature labour. 21 September was my father's 51st birthday and his fifth surviving daughter, Isabel Mary Kerr, was born on 22 September. She

was named for his youngest sister who had died so tragically at Segond Channel in 1921 while awaiting the arrival of *Pacifique* to take her to Vila for the birth of her baby.

His daughter born and my mother recovering, he had to return to the Islands. He had 'a regular contingent' to see him off on *Pacifique* on 29 October with all of us except my mother and Isabel and was accompanied by a Mr Purcell going to Turtle Bay to look after the books, store and other Kerr Brothers matters.

While in Noumea Graham Kerr arranged with the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* to send 10,000 francs to Paris. In that way goods could be purchased there for francs, instead of exchanging them for sterling in Sydney. After leaving Noumea he and Purcell stayed on the ship until she reached Santo.

Hugh Kerr met them at Segond Channel having accompanied Salisbury the British Condominium Government Agent on Santo on his launch. His own launch had broken down and they picked it up at Robert Petersen Stuart's on Aisse Island on the return trip and towed it back to Diamond Island, where they 'all stayed at D. H.'s for the night'. Next day, 12 November, Salisbury took them plus their luggage on to Turtle Bay where Graham took up residence in the house 'on top'. *Lunawanna* was out recruiting and he found, as usual, 'a terrible mess in the store'.

Several days were spent 'straightening up the stock so as to be able to discover what there is in the jumble'. I imagine the air would have been electric. Fortunately *Lunawanna* returned from her trip with 15 recruits.

She now had to go out again to return time-expired labour which meant their records had to be written up ready for official inspection. The store was also rushed after they were paid to buy goods to take home with them. *Lunawanna* had to receive stores and trade too as she was not only a recruiting vessel but a floating store. She left on 20 November for Maewo and the Banks group.

Graham Kerr was busy getting the store to rights and teaching Purcell his future job. D.H., not really happy and probably badly needing a holiday, was 'laid up with a bad arm and [we] had the French doctor up to have a look at it'. All the time he was busy 'unravelling the book mess. Makes one wild [,] the absurd mess' and opening the store for the surrounding Islanders to make purchases. Fortunately Purcell was 'picking up very quickly'.

They went down to Diamond Island on 27 November where they had dinner with D.H. and Jane Kerr. Salisbury and Thomas from Hog Harbour were there waiting for *Makambo* which came into Turtle Bay in the evening. The weather had turned squally so they could not all go aboard, 'however D.H., Janie and Salisbury scrambled up the rope ladder'. Probably for Hugh's health, they were going in *Makambo* for a trip to Santa Cruz, returning in a few days. 'Some N.Z. people are going there to work the timber and *Makambo* has houses, machinery, 14 ton boiler, etc. to land'.

Mme My was also on board; up from Vila to visit her son Richard at Shark Bay and she was landed before the ship left by what Graham Kerr called, a parachute. 'We took her to the Island. Mme Jacquier is looking after the house on the Island'. They all stayed the night there including Theo Thomas. Next day Thomas ran Mme My who was ill to Gardels in Salisbury's launch where she found that Richard was away at Malo, but insisted on waiting there until his return.

Graham Kerr and Purcell then moved down to the island and Alsopp—who was not mentioned in the diary until then—came down for meals. *Makambo* arrived back on 4 December. At the beginning they worked Julius Petersen's cargo from Mate Wulu as the tide was not favourable at Turtle Bay. 'She returned in the afternoon. Loaded 15 tons copra, and 11 tons cocoa. D.H. and Janie are going to Sydney by *Makambo*'.

After *Makambo* left, Graham Kerr, Mr and Mrs Anderson—he was a New Hebrides Mission missionary stationed at Hog harbour—Thomas and Salisbury accompanied him back to Diamond Island where they all stayed for the night.⁸ Things were in a mess at Turtle Bay for in between opening up goods brought by *Makambo* and supervising Purcell my father found he had to write up the Labour Register which was 11 months behind. Unfortunately it did not take long for Purcell to succumb to New Hebrides unhealthy climate and by 13 December he was showing signs of fever. He was still sick on 20 December 'when *Lunawanna* returned with 5 one year recruits'.

Apparently Alsopp was attending to plantation work and Graham Kerr everything else. As for Christmas day 25 December there was no celebration just 'a busy day at the Store and with the books. It is unfortunate Purcell having fever, leaving it very heavy on me. My eyes are beginning to suffer for

it'. I, Graham Kerr's daughter, am left feeling sorry for poor sick Purcell. My father was a workaholic and expected the same from everyone else. The year ended with Alsopp too 'getting a good deal of fever [but] Harbulot [who had a plantation up near Point Olry] is giving a hand on the plantation'.

It seemed that a plantation could not continue to run as the two brothers were running it. It needed to be a family affair centred round a woman like my mother to provide a constant homely atmosphere for the young men employed there. Living an isolated life and cut off from what they were used to in Australia, New Hebrides was not a tropical Paradise.

1923 had ended with the British Judge de Vere at loggerheads with Merton King. From the lengthy correspondence the parlous state of Condominium affairs was very obvious. Merton King wrote that De Vere's long letter, a copy of which was also sent to Dr Borgesius the Acting President of the Joint Court, was 'on the subject of the misdeeds of the Condominium Government and of myself [King] in particular'.

One of the most sensitive points brought up by de Vere was the refusal of both British and French Commissioners to send back to Santo five Islanders who had been judged not guilty of assisting in the murder of R.O.D. Clapcott in mid 1923. King, in his defence, wrote that he had

received earnest requests from the European settlers of South Santo that none of the men who formed part of the following of the 'prophet' Ronovura should be allowed to return to their homes, as if they [did], they [would] certainly form the nucleus of another conspiracy, and therefore constitute an element of danger to the settlers. My colleague and I thought it was our duty to give ear to their prayer, therefore decided to detain these men in Vila or its neighbourhood.

Another point at issue for de Vere was the appointment of R.N.A. Larney

who at considerable expense, and at a salary out of all proportion to that of other Condominium officials of similar standing, has been brought here from Fiji by the Condominium Government to carry out the duties of Land Surveyor in connection with Land Registration ... being detained here in complete idleness owing, apparently, to the unwillingness ... of the French side of the Condominium Government that he ... do any work whatever in the absence of a French colleague, of whose nomination we have so far heard nothing.

Condominium appointments were always in duplicate one British and one French. De Vere was not quibbling. Jules de Leener, who after eight years of valuable service to the Condominium had finally resigned having been expected to manage on a salary paid at the rate of 25F to the pound sterling against 65F paid to Larney. It did not make sense.

Another interesting accusation made by de Vere concerned what he considered the undue influence of Mr Frank Wallace:

As Agent of the Federal government of Australia, he has, or at any rate should have, no connection whatever with the British side of the Administration of the New Hebrides, which as far as I am aware is in no way subordinate to the Australian Commonwealth.

Merton King strongly rejected the suggestion but there was a strong feeling amongst British settlers that Australia had too much to say in New Hebridean affairs—without making any practical suggestions as to helping British settlers there.

The crux of the matter to de Vere was that, it was 'impossible for the Joint Court to carry out its difficult and sometimes delicate duties unless it has the wholehearted support of both sides of the Executive Governments'. He was not backward in pointing out faults in the French side either, ongoing obstruction being probably the worst. And he did not stop there.

It would seem as if anxiety to secure the goodwill of the French Authorities sometimes lead the British administration to subordinate not only the claims of Justice but the interests of British subjects to that object.

While every effort is being made by the French to secure and extend their interest in these Islands, comparatively little ... is being done by the British Government for British interests. The British Planter is severely handicapped in various ways ... It is common knowledge that the French openly proclaim that the British will soon be driven from the New Hebrides. They pertinently ask why the British government does not support its own compatriots, and the altruism which leads it to neglect them and to favour the Stranger, is neither understood nor admired by the average Frenchman, as I have often had occasion to observe.

But Sir C. Rodman (likely to be Cecil Rodwell) could not be expected to acknowledge the result of Western Pacific High Commission policy towards the New Hebrides. De Vere's letter was sent off to the Secretary of State Colonial Office with Rodman's comment,

... the attitude of Mr de Vere ... towards Mr King ... is hardly what one would expect in a British Judge in a Franco-British Administration of which the control is always necessarily difficult and can only be carried out at all by cooperation between the higher officials. My sympathies are entirely with Mr King, and I deeply regret that this officer, to whom the Condominium chiefly owes its redemption from total failure, should be subjected at the close of an honourable career to a malicious and, as far as I am able to judge, altogether unwarranted attack.⁹

But it was not as simple as the Western Pacific High Commissioner suggests. Merton King was indeed a first-class deliverer of Colonial Office policy which I am sure he sometimes found abhorrent and did his best to alter; but the total failure of the whole venture was not far off and the Western Pacific High Commission was not blameless.

Smith-Rewse was later asked to comment on de Vere's letter. Being new to the job and a diplomatic man he submitted 'that it was not in the best interests of the Condominium Government that [de Vere] should interfere in matters of which he has no definite information'.¹⁰ But then as he said he himself was new to the job.

At the beginning of 1924 the Joint Court had still not commenced land registration work and King, coming to the end of his job as British Resident, told the Western Pacific High Commissioner on 21 January that the French Resident was still without instructions and that he thought 'urgent representations should be made to the French government... to withdraw opposition to such resumption'.¹¹

Procrastination would follow. The French government said that the Court should not resume until it was fully manned. But much of the preliminary work could easily have been done and in any case all claims had to remain as claims for one year after publication to allow for counter-claims before they could be finally adjudicated.

Interestingly King wrote in confidence on 22 January to Rodwell, to accompany a report from Dr Borgesium, Acting President of the Joint Court. Regarding *immatriculation*, French for registration of real-estate, he had gathered

... from remarks made by the French Resident, M. de la Vaissière, that the delay in the French agreeing to resumption of land claim registration, was not entirely unconnected with the reported negotiation of the French Government with the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* and the *Société Française* [*Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*] in connection with the land claims of the last named in the Group.¹²

Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides would not have wanted to advertise that much of the land it claimed, and was trying to sell; rested on very shaky foundations and the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* might not have wanted to commit itself financially. The French Government—resulting from its original ties

with John Higginson, founder of *Compagnie Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, later renamed *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*—was heavily financially involved and would not want the Joint Court to probe into *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*' land claims either. Hence the continued refusal of the French Government to agree to the resumption of the land claims work of the Joint Court which had been set up in 1912 for that very purpose and from its very beginning not favoured by the French.

Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides through the agency of Ballandes was the company that Graham Kerr was coming closer and closer to negotiating with. But he depended on the British part of the Condominium—whose policy was set in place by the British Colonial Office via the Western Pacific High Commission—complying with the entreaties of the British settlers to allow them to be competitive with their French counterparts.

There were changes in British administration at the highest level. On 24 January 1924 James Henry Thomas took over temporarily as Secretary of State Colonial Office from Victor Cavendish the 9th Duke of Devonshire. On 6 November, Thomas was succeeded by L.C.M.S. Amery. In Fiji T.E. Fell was Acting Western Pacific High Commissioner in place of Sir C. Rodwell, who was on leave prior to replacement by Sir Eyre Hutson in 1925.

Merton King who would be 70 in July 1924 was also about to be officially replaced after 26 years service with the Western Pacific High Commission—17 of these years spent in New Hebrides as Resident Commissioner during which he had only twice taken leave.

G.B. Smith-Rewse, accepted the British Resident Commissioner position on 28 January, there being no other candidate 'who would be likely to accept the post'.¹³ He had good qualifications having previously been District Officer, Gilbert and Ellice Islands, District Officer and Consul of Tonga, and more recently Acting Administrator on Nauru now to be taken over by the Commonwealth Government of Australia. In all his postings he was highly regarded and the same would be the case in the New Hebrides—not a British Protectorate but a unique experiment—a Condominium of two powerful countries which had been enemies for centuries. It says a lot for both King and Smith-Rewse that the transition was made without dissension. King offered to stay on with Smith-Rewse 'as long as considered desirable'.

Smith-Rewse was to leave Nauru for the New Hebrides in early February 'in order to have as long a time with [King] before [his] departure' as possible. He arrived in Vila on board *Makambo* on 27 March. While Merton King was on leave in early March, E.G. Seagoe acted in his place as British Resident.

Problems resulting from the disparity between the pound sterling and the wildly fluctuating franc continued. At the end of 1923 the cash credit in Britain's favour in the Condominium Treasury exceeded the French by 40%. Merton King put this down to the French thinking that they could draw on the Joint Treasury for any expenses their own funds could not meet. His French colleague said the discrepancy was caused by the French using Tonkinese labour to work on the roads. King disagreed. They had been introduced to work for French planters not for the service of the Condominium.

Public works and amenities to benefit all the settlers were a necessity but each side was wary of picking up the tabs without imposing further taxation. This infuriated both British and French settlers who thought they were already taxed too heavily with nothing to show for it. King told the Western Pacific High Commissioner, Rodwell, on 25 January that

in any case in which the French Government has refused to share any particular expenditure the whole cost has been borne by the British National budget; it has not been placed upon the Condominium.

Rodwell however was principally worried that no further expense should accrue to 'His Majesty's Treasury'.¹⁴ New Hebrides was enough of a drain already.

The matter had wider ramifications. W. Lockhart Bell, Assistant Collector of Customs, had a wife and four daughters living in Sydney for reasons of health and education. Bell, as a Condominium employee, was paid in francs. Merton King, acting on a decision of the British Judge to the High Court, de Vere—who had so strongly defended de Leener, another Condominium official, although not a British subject like Bell—

suggested that some of his salary be paid in sterling for remittance to his wife in Sydney. T.E. Fell, Acting Commissioner, considered this a legitimate charge against the British part of Condominium funds.

This left in the air the problem of how to deal with French or foreign members of the Condominium who also had families being educated in Australia. The current rate of exchange at this period was 94F to the pound sterling. A special arrangement, as was the case with Esperanza, was the only suggestion that King believed that French Colonial officials in France would be likely to accept, 'otherwise the Condominium Government is in danger of collapse, desired by neither Britain nor France'.¹⁵

On 25 January King suggested the prohibition of recruitment of native labourers from Erromanga, Aneityum, Aniwa, Futuna, Maewo and the Torres Group. In all these places the population was seriously reduced by diseases and other causes 'and if some measures ... be not adopted, the race will disappear altogether'. He told his French colleague that

I am convinced after 17 years residence... and close study of the prevailing conditions, that although not the predominating, the removal of numbers of the inhabitants—many of whom never return—from one island to another, is ... a contributory cause of such diminution.¹⁶

He did not mention that the first four places mentioned were under New Hebrides Mission control and not many recruits would have been permitted to go from there. These, in fact, were the islands with the most dramatic loss of population thought to be the result of stringent control of Indigenous rites considered by the Mission to be 'Un-Christian'. Merton King at the end of his tenure was not about to raise that subject but I am sure it would have been included amongst his 'other causes'. In any case, the French Resident would not agree to the prohibition.

On 4 April Merton King sent labour figures from July to December 1923, British and French, to the High Commissioner. These showed a fall-off of 40% from the same period in 1922, especially among British planters, although King instanced a French recruiter who had only one recruit in 4 months.

The majority of recruits were engaged for 1 year or 6 months as very few would sign on for the once-usual 3 years. Between 1914-1923, 30% of recruits came from Pentecost and, Malekula with the rest from Aoba, Maewo and Ambrym. During 1923 the French introduced more than 800 Indo-Chinese labour. If successful, wrote King, the French intended to cease recruiting local labour and rely entirely on Indo-Chinese of whom a continued supply was guaranteed. This would also 'get rid of missionary interference to which the French allege they will be subject[ed] as long as aboriginals are employed'.¹⁷

There were many differing opinions about the new labourers: some said they were better, some that they needed more supervision. Graham Kerr would later be one of these. The ones Kerr preferred were the so-called Indigenous heathens who could be trusted to do an honest day's work, and he was not alone in holding that opinion. King concluded that with the French using Tonkinese labour exclusively there would be more local labour for British settlers.

Judge de Vere saw fit on 12 April to send off a letter direct to the Western Pacific High Commissioner in which he criticised the raw deal British planters received *vis-à-vis* their French fellows, particularly as regards the employment of women.¹⁸

Art. 33 of the Protocol of 1914 lays down conditions for the engagement and employment of Native women and children, which if duly enforced, would probably prove a sufficient safeguard and protection for them, while permitting the Planters and Traders to avail themselves of their services.

While, however the French are able to do so, Kings Regulations—to wit, 1 of 1913, 9 of 1914 and 3 of 1923—which go beyond both the letter and spirit of the Anglo-French Convention, practically amount to a bar to the employment of women by British subjects on Plantations or elsewhere as labourers, or in fact at all except as domestic servants for a very limited period.

So for once the set-in-concrete Western Pacific High Commission policy for the New Hebrides was being criticised by a British Judge whose job it was to define Condominium law in the Joint Court. And he did not stop there.

There can be little doubt that British and French alike are disposed to regard the provisions of the Protocol as a dead letter. It would be strange if they did not do so, since the Joint Court is seldom given an opportunity for meting out Justice. The net result is merely that the British employer is heavily handicapped in his efforts to obtain male labour, since he cannot 'sign' native women and, without females, it is almost impossible to obtain the Males.

British employers also had to supply certain needs to their Indigenous employees that were not included in the French schedule for example sick pay. A French employer could afford to treat with almost complete indifference, even the rules of the Protocol:

... in the assurance that his government [will] support him in their evasion ...the French Employer can openly defy the Law ... while the average British Employer is practically forced to do the same thing, but less openly, owing to the onerous nature of the conditions imposed on him.

De Vere thought that

... all cases involving the relations between Employer and Employed (when the latter belong to any native Race) should be in the hands of, or at least subject to an appeal to the Joint Court.

Amongst the greatest handicaps to the success of the British Planter or Trader, as compared with his French rival, is the refusal of the British government to permit him to employ imported Labour. While the French are now importing large numbers of Tonkinese labourers, in addition to the Javanese already employed by them, the unhappy Britisher is legally confined to the employment of such local Male Labour as can be found amongst a diminishing population, naturally prone to idleness that has too often experienced the worse side of White man's justice.

De Vere added a postscript to this letter on 6 May:

Although the new British Resident Commissioner arrived here over a month ago, Mr M. King still remains in control. In order therefore, to avoid possible delay in transmission I am sending this letter direct to you. I have already provided Mr King with a duplication.

It remained to be seen whether any real notice would be accorded to the legitimate points raised by de Vere but from previous times when Western Pacific High Commission policy was challenged the challenger had come off worst, for instance, William Wilkes in 1913 so De Vere's chances were slim. He was due to go on leave on 16 June, travelling to Ireland via London after three years' service.¹⁹

Meanwhile Esperanza was still in Europe. He said he was leaving by *Mooltan* on 5 May and, if his health permitted, he wanted to stay until all land claims were registered, considering that by that time the Joint Court 'would have lost any reason for its existence'. He still had not arrived by 6 August when Smith-Rewse again enquired. Esperanza intimated on 27 July, that a daughter's wedding meant that he could not leave until the beginning of September.²⁰

The whole New Hebrides situation looked like a big joke. I doubt if people who did not actually live their lives, or run businesses there, had the least appreciation of the unbelievable situation and the ruffled feathers it caused, not least those of de Vere.

Smith-Rewse was getting a not very promising introduction to his new job, even with Merton King there to guide him. It did not take him long to realise that the New Hebrides was the 'black sheep' of the territories administered by the Western Pacific High Commission and that British officials employed there got a raw deal as compared with those in other Protectorates. He thought they should be the same wherever they served in the Pacific. In fact the job in New Hebrides was much more difficult, onerous and delicate because of the necessary British/French interaction. He, himself, did not even get an entertainment allowance as he had been allowed in his previous jobs with Western Pacific High Commission. Salaries paid to British Condominium officials were also lower than those paid to other Western Pacific High Commission employees and were also subject to British taxation.

Another very experienced person with a salary problem and a family to educate, was E.G. Seagoe who, despite a strong wish to remain in New Hebrides, had applied for a transfer to another British colony in view of poor prospects where he was. Seagoe had been referred to in the highest terms by Merton King and also Smith-Rewse, who wrote

... since my arrival here Mr Seagoe has been of the greatest assistance to me ... [he] has special knowledge of local conditions and the natives of the Group... a man of mature years and experience is more suitable ... in a place like Vila.

Resident in the Group since 1902, first as clerk to his uncle the first British Resident, Captain Rason, plantation owner for a few years, then holder of various Condominium appointments, Seagoe was the obvious choice as Assistant to Smith-Rewse. The Secretary of State Colonial Office would use Seagoe's 'mature years "not" to meet his wishes'.²¹

The position of Assistant to Smith-Rewse would go to George Joy, a younger man who wanted a position in Aden or West Africa. The Pacific was not his interest. He took up his duties in Vila on 15 August 1924 on probation for three years. I cannot help feeling that the Colonial Office did not want a person in the job who knew the New Hebrides and sympathised with British subjects there. A person with no local interest would be better able to carry out ruthless British policy that originated in far-away England.

This was when the French were going all out to develop French interests. The French sloop *Aldebaran*, with the acting French High Commissioner, M. D'Arboussier, on board was again in the Group between 8 June and 6 July, including a visit to Santo. Two very different approaches to the 'problem' of the New Hebrides were being enacted.

There was still trouble finding a Native Advocate. A female barrister of the Brussels Bar was suggested for the job but Merton King did not agree because the natives 'hold all women in very low esteem' and the French Resident agreed with him.²² Also the appointment of a Registrar to the Joint Court was slow to be filled because no one could be found to take it up at the salary offered; the very reason that de Leener had resigned.

Smith-Rewse formally took over the position of British Resident Commissioner at Vila on 11 June; Merton King's retirement taking effect from 10 July, his 70th birthday.

Whether by coincidence or not, Captain Wardle in HMAS *Brisbane* and the *Marguerite* also visited the New Hebrides while *Aldebaran* was there. With no entertainment allowance Smith-Rewse had to apply for 50 pounds from Western Pacific High Commission to entertain them. The ships visited Vila, Port Sandwich and Hog Harbour. Smith-Rewse accompanied the *Brisbane* to Second Channel. He said: 'The sight of a man-of-war off the South Santo where the late Mr Clapcott was recently murdered would have a good effect'. Smith-Rewse reported on 9 July that 'the effect of the visit of any of H.M.'s ships is always excellent and I only wish that the government of the Commonwealth of Australia could arrange for an annual visit'.²³ The days of regular Royal Navy Australia Station and the later Joint Naval Commission visits were sadly long gone.

Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides land claims were also causing trouble in the Solomons. A.E.L. Vigoureux, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* Director in Noumea, wrote to the Western Pacific High Commissioner on 4 July about land they claimed on Vanikoro, now part of the Solomons Protectorate. A note on the front of the translation given to the Commissioner by Secretary H.G. Pilling said:

The SFNH succeeded CCNH which, I understand, was formed by a disgruntled and Anglophobe Irishman (Higginson) with a view to obtaining the preponderance in, and ousting British influence from New Hebrides. The obscurity surrounding the acquisition of land claimed by the Society is thought to be one of the reasons for the French hesitance in consenting to the reopening of the Condominium Land Court.

Despite Pilling's colourful language his conclusion was not wrong.

On 4 August at long last the Secretary of State Colonial Office advised the Western Pacific High Commissioner that the French Government had agreed to the resumption of lands work in the New Hebrides under certain conditions. Whatever they were though nothing seemed to happen and no instructions were given to the French Resident Commissioner. By February 1925 they had still not arrived.²⁴ The joke, if ever it was one, was wearing thin.

On 28 July the New Hebrides Mission held its annual Synod at Lenakel, Tanna. Mission feeling never needed rousing but it was probably running higher than usual as a French Government Agent was about to be planted in their midst.²⁵ Permission for houses for the two Government Agents had just been granted.²⁶

Thomson Macmillan, Clerk of the Synod, completely disregarding the fact that New Hebrides was not a British colony but a Condominium, wrote that it was the 'unalterable opinion [of the Synod] that the one true and effective cure for the abuses and irregularities in these islands is that they shall pass entirely under British control ... As the next best solution ... the Synod suggests a British mandate over the Group'. He went on to say that it would be a 'travesty to give a mandate to the French who have consistently and in spite of repeated remonstrance and protest, deliberately failed to carry out the regulations of the convention which they had signed'.

Another of the Synod's 'solutions' was that 'one and the same code of laws shall apply equally to British and to French'. The Synod 'ventures once again to approach the authorities both in Australia and especially in the Colonial Office, to take firm action for the righting of wrong, and the removal of a constant source of friction that has too long existed'.²⁷

This diatribe was sent off to the Western Pacific High Commissioner by Smith-Rewse on 5 August with no comment. If it had been King, he would have written that no comment was necessary as he had seen it all before. He knew from experience that the Mission would never back down or grant the Joint Government the slightest chance of success. And how could the Condominium be supposed to work with such one-sided perpetually repeated comments? The French side of the Condominium was secular. Their Marist Mission took no part in government. It was not a militant body like the New Hebrides Mission. No wonder the French were angry.

To start with, the French bided by what they had signed for in the Anglo-French Convention of 1906. Egged on by the New Hebrides Mission, the Western Pacific High Commission had altered the terms of the Convention for British subjects only, causing bitter resentment. And which code of law should be imposed? And what did Australia have to do with it? Britain and France were equal parties to the Convention of 1906. Neither the New Hebrides Mission nor Australia was included.

By 1924 the Presbyterian missionaries had made themselves the best-hated people in the New Hebrides to both British and French. Since their advent in the Group they had considered it belonged to them and that they were the ones to bring the Indigenous people to see the 'Light' in their terms. These did not include working for money which was the 'root of all evil'.

In 1875 the newly established Western Pacific High Commission had played into missionary hands by saying that British missionaries were the only British subjects they were prepared to support in the New Hebrides which was, even then, a thorn in their side. At the time many people disagreed with this simplistic approach to the New Hebrides but with the powerful backing of such bodies as the Aborigines Protection Society the Mission could not be made to desist from its propaganda. Not that these same 'aborigines', rendered powerless in their own Islands, were not indeed in need of help as certain anthropologists, like Dr William Rivers and, before him, Dr Felix Speiser, were starting to point out.

The Colonial Office was in a difficult situation. The Condominium was a failure and unwanted New Hebrides a drain on the British Exchequer. The New Hebrides Mission had powerful supporters

both in the colonies and England, all of whom had to be appeased without actually granting their loudly expressed wishes. A fine-balancing act was required.

What could be done with the disruptive Judge de Vere? He appeared to be a prickly man—not a difficult state to reach in the New Hebrides of that time. But he could not be permitted to rock the British part of the Condominium-boat or he well might wreck it. After discussion with the Secretary of State, Acting High Commissioner Fell wrote on 15 October 1924:

The position of the Resident Commissioner in the New Hebrides is not by any means an easy one. It requires firmness, forbearance and tact... I can see little hope of Mr. de Vere altering his tactics (of attacking his compatriots). He does not appear to be of sufficiently generous and temperament to do so.²⁸

But the British Judge had brought up many sensitive matters which the Western Pacific High Commission needed to tackle, including the position held by the F.E. Wallace. De Vere would be transferred to Cyprus in 1925.

By October French labour developments were becoming clearer. On 10 November Smith-Rewse wrote to the Western Pacific High Commissioner about the introduction of Asiatic labour into the New Hebrides by British subjects, saying that none of them ‘imported under French auspices are employed by British subjects’. It had been hoped that now French planters had a source of outside labour they would cease to employ Indigenous ones. This may be true of some of the smaller planters he said but he had been told by ‘more than one prominent French planter that he still intended to continue to recruit among the native population in addition to the imported Tonkinese’. The Tonkinese engaged themselves for five years but the Islanders like those of Fiji, Samoa, and the Gilbert and Ellice Groups preferred shorter engagements. In fact said Smith-Rewse:

The native of the New Hebrides shows an increasing dislike to engaging himself and especially for long periods ... In many of the islands, more particularly the Southern and Central, the natives are growing more produce of their own, satisfying their financial requirements in this manner and thus lessening their desire to recruit. It is noticeable that on the islands where this policy is being followed the conditions of the natives are better and their numbers show an upward turn.

In Graham Kerr’s diary entries referred to at the beginning of the chapter he too had noted the difference and was taking advantage of this development in the area round Tongoa and making contact with Indigenous growers for mutual benefit.

Smith-Rewse submitted that

... the local supply of labourers will never meet the demands of the British settlers and especially so when one considers that the formation of the new French company means a definite step forward on the part of the French ... It is evident that the French settler has all the advantages on his side in this respect, while the British subject has in addition, the added difficulties in procuring local labourers by the restrictions imposed on him by the King’s Reg. No. 1 of 1913. I must confess that if no assistance is given, I do not see how the British settler can continue to exist ... It will not be many years before all commercial and trading interests will be in the hands of the French.

He had attended the last annual meeting of the New Hebrides British Association:

It appears hard to them that permission is granted for Chinese labourers to be employed on Nauru and Ocean Island and in Samoa but refused to them.

And he ended his letter

I venture to ask for Your Excellency's support towards obtaining His Majesty's Government to allow the introduction of Chinese labourers from Hong-Kong, as is permitted in other parts of the Pacific.²⁹

Smith-Rewse had the interests of British settlers at heart and was well liked by both them and their French fellows. What Theo Thomas, Honourable Secretary of New Hebrides British Association had told Smith-Rewse on 25 October was very much to the point: 'Unless the importation of foreign labour under some form of engagement be permitted, British Planters will shortly be forced to sell out to French interests'. And he knew what he was talking about because his plantation at Hog Harbour was, like Kerr's plantation at Turtle Bay and others, already under discussion.³⁰

The 'new French company' referred to by Smith-Rewse was now very much in the news. On 10 November he sent a confidential despatch to the High Commissioner that he had heard on good authority that

... a company [had] recently been promoted in France to acquire the whole of the interests of the SFNH with a capital of 5 million francs.

The principal shareholders are *La Banque de l'Indo-Chine*; *La Banque Parisienne*; *La Société Nickel* (Rothschilds); Ballandes and the Government of French Indo-China, and it is said that each of these parties is interested to the extent of one million francs.

The object of the new *Société* is the formation of a subsidiary company with a capital of twenty-five million francs for the purpose of exploiting the lands acquired from the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* by bringing out settlers (French), installing and financing them but it is thought that activity will be confined for the immediate present to ... confirmation of their land titles.

The French government is also interested in the new Company, not financially it is thought but only to the extent of some thirty thousand hectares of land acquired for colonisation purposes under an old grant from the SFNH, certain areas of which have been disposed of.³¹

This land—of very dubious title—had been the reason the French opposed the land-claim work of the Joint Court in the first place. Would this mean that now the French would agree to the work going ahead or did they intend to ignore the Condominium and go ahead anyway? Smith-Rewse had also been advised that a branch of the Bank of Indo-China was to be established in Vila, fulfilling a long-felt want.

On 21 November the Secretary of State Colonial Office sent the Western Pacific High Commissioner extracts from various French papers about the 'new *Société*'.³² This was *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CFINH), French Real Estate Company of New Hebrides.

Its inaugural meeting was held in Paris on 30 October, followed by a second one on 7 November in the presence of M. Daladier, at that time French Minister for Colonies. The *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was again in financial straits. The Higginson heirs had been trying since his death in 1904 to realise on 750,000 hectares of land belonging to him, or claimed by him, to anyone who would buy, including Australia, but nothing had come of it. The new company was set up to develop this land.

Following the 7 November meeting, General Arthur de Salins was elected President and Charles Revel, Inspector General of Colonies, Deputy Administrator. On the Board of Administration—to represent the French government—were Edouard Picanon, former Inspector of Colonies and Governor of New Caledonia 1902–1904, and Georges Tronchon who had direct access to the Minister for Colonies.³³

Included amongst others on the Board were M. Laure, Noumea Director of *Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CFNH); Ballandes; a member of the Higginson family and Raoul Duval of Le Havre, Agent for Colonial mercantile products. Of the people mentioned above Graham Kerr had met Charles Revel in New Hebrides in 1922.

On 7 January 1925 the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would reserve for itself 45% of the product of land sales of the New Company. Charles Aupied—formerly a stockbroker from Bordeaux interested in real-estate—was now Director of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco/Hébridaise* and in control of the New Hebridean affairs of both which was a very powerful position.

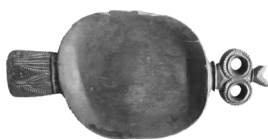
On 21 October the British Consul at Saigon sent a translation of an article from a local French paper *L'Éveil Économique*, No. 383 of October 12 1924, titled 'Dual control in the New Hebrides' which said:

The French are beginning to obtain ... superiority and the British show a tendency to recognise it. But in order 'not to lose' face as the Chinese say, they hint to us 'Increase your superiority, develop your industries, increase the number of your subjects in order that we can, without blushing, recognise your right to the sole control'.³⁴

For this reason the French journal was an out-and-out supporter of the recruiting of Annamite labour for the New Hebrides.

The attitude of the Western Pacific High Commission and Colonial Office to British nationals must indeed have been a puzzle to the French who wanted the New Hebrides so much. They could not conceive of the idea that 'perfidious Albion' might from the very beginning have wanted to recognise France's right to sole control if she could have done so with honour thus ridding herself of what she regarded as a burden.

On 3 December Smith-Rewse announced the appointment of Monsieur Joseph Guyon as Governor of New Caledonia and French High Commission to the New Hebrides to replace Jules Repiquet who had retired in 1923.



Endnotes

- 1 On 16 Jan my father wrote to D.H. Kerr: 'I think it is a pity you had to get rid of Johnston. Personally I think he had far too much to do, to do anything properly. Turtle Bay is not a one-man show by any means and I do not think it pays to try and make it one. It is almost one man's job to run the Store, keep the stock in something like order and do the books.... I was saved quite two months work last time down, by having these in fairly decent order'.
- 2 SMH 10 April, 1924:8, col.3.
- 3 See WPHC 1566/1924.
- 4 See WPHC 1566/1924.
- 5 Ernest Reid, an Australian, ran a boat building establishment in Vila. He married Jeanne Ohlen, daughter of Heinrich Ohlen, born in New Caledonia but later settled in New Hebrides. They had a son, Ernest Henry Reid, known at Ernie, 1911-1992, and a daughter Agnes who married Antoine Rossi. The elder Ernest finally settled in Sydney like many of the other settlers and my family knew the Reids and Ohlens well.
- 6 He would also have applied for a license to recruit 100 native labourers in *Lunawanna*, it being granted on 11 Sept.
- 7 Mrs Seagoe, born Daisy Roche was the wife of E.G. Seagoe, at that time acting Assistant to the new British Resident Commissioner, Smith-Rewse; Mrs Adam was the wife of the Acting Joint Registrar, Joint Court, C.G. Adam; Miss de Gayon was probably the daughter of Ernest de Gayon, one time G.A. on Malekula; and Miss Leconte was the daughter of Jules Leconte, at that time President of *Syndicat Français Agricole des Nouvelles-Hebrides* in succession to Fernand Largeau.
- 8 I am wondering if this was the occasion when the French lady, Mme. Jacquier, who ran the house on Diamond Island at this time got—according to Alsopp—a 'rough spin'. My father heard about it later and was incensed and wrote to Alsopp on 10 March 1925: 'During the whole time I was there she led the life of a lady—practically the only work she did was making a few dresses for Christmas for which she was paid'. I can only say that my father was a hard taskmaster and like his brother difficult to work for. Brought up in pioneer conditions in New Zealand there was nothing, gentle and easy-going about either of them. Actually they were not dissimilar in that respect to the Presbyterian missionaries.
- 9 All correspondence in the de Vere case, including his attack on Wallace is to be found in WPHC 2935/1923. I have only mentioned a few of the points brought up in the correspondence.
- 10 WPHC 1314/1924, Smith-Rewse to WPH Cmr 7 July 1924.
- 11 WPHC 198/1924.
- 12 WPHC 609/1924.
- 13 WPHC 228/1924.
- 14 WPHC 629/1924.
- 15 WPHC 681/1924. King to WPH Cmr, 11 Feb 1924.
- 16 WPHC 610/1924. King to WPH Cmr, 25 Jan 1924. King to French Resident, 18 Jan 1924.
- 17 WPHC 1073/1924.
- 18 WPHC 1314/1924.
- 19 I don't know when de Vere left New Hebrides. He also fell out with Smith-Rewse, considering himself slighted at not being asked to an official function. See WPHC 2361/1924 and WPHC 2372/1924.
- 20 WPHC 1396/1924.
- 21 WPHC 1596/1924.
- 22 The year ended with no Native Advocate appointed. See WPHC 1831/1923.
- 23 WPHC 1413/1924.
- 24 WPHC 1845/1924.
- 25 Smith-Rewse, in his politically delicate posting was probably not aware of the still festering aftermath of a confrontation between the highly-excited Rev. Nicholson and the French vessel *Kersaint*, which appeared at Lenakel in Nov 1913 to supervise the boarding of 'heathen' recruits. William Wilkes, Condominium Government Agent intervened, as was his duty, taking the French side and for his pains was dismissed by the WPHC. This was despite the fact that, as a Condominium appointee, dismissal could only happen with the agreement of both parties—a very sore point with the French.
- 26 WPHC 2364/1924. Smith-Rewse gave his consent for the houses to be built on 27 Oct. He reported that 'a slight difficulty has existed in the post and may possibly arise again in the future' but if the French 'appoint a man of tact and character I am confident that friction will not arise'. No mention of tact also being displayed by the Rev. T. Macmillan.
- 27 WPHC 2205/1924.
- 28 WPHC 3229/1924.
- 29 WPHC 3046/1924. This includes the minute from Theo Thomas given below.
- 30 As far back as 3 Oct 1922, Graham Kerr in a letter from Turtle Bay to Kerr Bros Sydney office had mentioned 'there is a big thing on here if we are careful with it ... With this Harbour here and the situation surrounding it, it is the only place in New Hebrides for a town, and then there is the back country for settlement ... It would wipe Vila

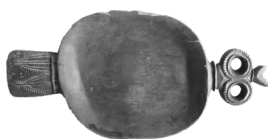
off the map. Wants a very big Company that would probably work on the Cooperative plan with its settlers ... We would want to buy up Petersen's place [Mate Wulu] so as to have the whole surroundings of the Harbour. France is more likely for this sort of thing than Australia, where they have more than they can handle ... I wrote to Mr My confidentially ... The proposition was to take in all our property in the New Hebrides ... Perhaps Mr My could get a big French Company formed (colonising company), probably subsidised by the French government. They would want to buy land... away towards Big Bay ... We have a good area for them to start on but for a big town and settlement they want plenty of country ... It would not be a vast undertaking to make a passage for a steamer like the *Pacifique* to come into the Harbour here. Second Channel is no place for a town ... Vila is no place for a town—not enough important country around it ... Port Sandwich—no country around it. There is nothing left but Diamond Harbour ... all natural advantages—water supply, country ... Perhaps Mr Largeau (New Hebrides Director SFNH) could handle it better than Mr My?'. Since then other disgruntled British settlers had expressed interest in selling out, including the Thomas's at Hog Harbour as mentioned in the early part of this chapter. Was this proposition the nucleus of the plan that led to the formation of CFINH in 1924 I wonder? My father at that time would not have realised what a ruthless set-up he was getting into.

31 WPHC 3032/1924.

32 WPHC 21/1925, The extracts from *Le Matin* 4 Nov 1924, 'La défense des droits français aux Nouvelles-Hébrides'; *Journée Industrielle* 4 Nov 1924, 'Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides'; *L'Univers Financier*, 5 Nov 1924, 'Société Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides'; and *Journée Industrielle* 11 Nov 1924, 'Exploitations Coloniales...' are included with this report.

33 I found out later from a different source that Georges Tronchon had direct access to the Minister for Colonies.

34 WPHC 3046/1924.



Chapter 7 1925: The Idea that British Plantation Owners Will Sell Out to the French Takes Root

Graham Kerr started off the new year at Turtle Bay cleaning up the store and having a good look around the plantation. Then on 3 January he left with Julius Petersen's son Holly (Holger) for Hog Harbour. They went in Holly's launch and Alsopp and Purcell accompanied them 'for three day's change to try and shake the fever off'.

Graham Kerr, on his way back to Sydney, was to connect with *Makambo* at Hog Harbour when it arrived to load Thomas's copra. They were all treated to great hospitality; tennis and bridge after dinner on 3 January, and next day, after more tennis and a farewell dinner at Thomas's, '[we] all went on board ... Thomas has been very good to us. Said good bye to them all and *Makambo* left for Sydney', calling at Malo, Bushman's Bay, Aloa, Ringdove Bay, and Voambi before reaching Vila on 6 January.

He was home in Sydney by 15 January and immediately set to work. D.H. Kerr was also in Sydney at this time and the problem of staffing Turtle Bay was to the fore. Graham Kerr arranged for a man named Turner to go to Santo when *Makambo* made its return trip. It would be a short and sad venture. On 1 April

... we had word from Burns Philp and Co. that Turner is missing on *Makambo* between Vila and Norfolk. Apparently he was on his way through to Sydney. We had word from Turtle Bay that he was bad with fever and they said they were sending him to Hospital in Vila.

Turner would have been greeted at Turtle Bay by Alsopp and Purcell, both recovering from malaria and promptly went down with a violent attack of the same scourge. At Vila he probably decided that the New Hebrides was not for him and, in a low frame of mind on the way back to Sydney, he took his life.

Yet another tragedy nearer to home struck on 19 April when the



Photo 27: Len Kerr on a bike at Kermadec about 1924–25. Photo provided by Len Kerr's family (Lisa and Gary Kerr) in early 2018.

youngest member of our family 7 month old Isabel, suddenly succumbed to diphtheria. The rest of us were farmed out to family and friends and a strict look-out kept for the same disease. Fortunately we all escaped. This time my bereaved parents could visit their baby's grave. Not so with little Jean who lost her life in the sea between Ambrym and Malekula when *Tathra* foundered in 1912. That was something that went so deep it was never discussed.

Other deaths this year were the 16 year old daughter of Julius Peterson, Sophie, and the youngest son of Emile My, Richard, aged 22. His grieving parents sent a letter from Santo with the sad news to my parents on 12 April.

To get Muriel away from Kermadec where Isabel had died, my father arranged for us all to go to Dee Why for a fortnight in early May. He would come there when he could, in between work commitments, arrivals and departures of island shipping, unloading, storing and disposal of copra and cacao, etc. He too was feeling 'anyhow' with a recurrence of fever, as he wrote in his diary on 30 April. He went to see Dr O'Neill in Macquarie St. 'He is giving me a good overhaul.'

Graham Kerr was always looking for new equipment that would make work on the plantation more efficient and, on 19 February, he, D.H. Kerr and Lockhart Bell—who was on leave from the New Hebrides to visit his wife and daughters—visited Hawkesbury Agricultural College to see a demonstration of ploughing with a Fordson Tractor. He was familiar with a horse-drawn plough. In fact he had borrowed one earlier and ploughed up land to grow potatoes at home. A mechanical one would indeed have been an innovation and he sent one off with a plough and a 'sawing outfit' on *Makambo* when she left on 9 April.

By 18 June it was time for him to return to the New Hebrides. Hugh and Jane Kerr had gone back to Turtle Bay by *Dupleix* on 12 March and by 28 May Hugh was reporting great success with the Gordon Dryer. 'It gives great satisfaction, and the cacao prepared by it is even better than was expected. We tried one lot of fermented cacao put straight in machine without any drying in sun, and it turned out just about as near perfect as possible ... We should have eight to ten tons for *Dupleix* ... There is no doubt that a good many of the Planters here, when they know how well the Gordon Dryer works, will order.' He suggested that the firm try and secure the Agency if it were still available.

The problem of labour was always there and Hugh Kerr told his brother that Robertson¹ said:

... they have some Chinese Mechanics on *Makatea* [Burns Philp and Co.] whom they pay forty Chinese dollars per month, which is about the equivalent of about four pounds English. We should try and get about six right away ... who could run the drying machinery ... and about three for carpentering and mason work ... Their passages would have to be arranged. They would be far more reliable than Natives and would be for a long period.

Hugh, it seems, was still hopeful that the Western Pacific High Commission would see the light and allow British planters to get foreign labour. It was certainly necessary. As regards copra we 'are going to have our work cut out to get all we have made in time for *Dupleix*. There is going to be large crop this year'. This led on to recruiting. 'Lunawanna is away on a trip to Aoba, Maewo and Merlav [in the Banks Islands]. Aldington² did a trip to Malekula but had no luck there as there was a tabu on. Hope we may hear of a way of getting outside Labour soon as it is a very uncertain business getting them here now.'

Hugh Kerr ended his letter to the firm in Sydney about yet another man for the plantation. Probably with the ill-fated Turner in mind, he suggested that 'he should take a course of that malaria treatment of Sullivans before coming. Should start on it a month before leaving'. In fact I do not think there was any reliable treatment for malaria in those days.

Graham Kerr did not receive a copy of this letter until he reached Vila on 30 June and had booked himself into Gubbay's Hotel. He found Everard Fox there in *White Heather* from Tongoa, to which he returned on 3 July. From a letter he wrote on 24 July to James Johnston who was then working for J.E. Fysh at Big Bay, he told him he had this trip 'been as far as Tongoa where things are booming at present'.

The question of labour had arisen and Graham Kerr told him he was 'approaching the Commissioner [Smith-Rewse] on the matter and hope something can be arranged. I think Javanese would be

the best for here, and I believe the Dutch government would be favourable'.³ He was sorry that Johnston was in 'such a damned out-of-the-way place' and ended his letter:

Do you get any fever at all? There is a hook-worm expert in the Group at present and I believe he finds about 100% of the natives infected badly and a good many of the Whites too. It is said the natives have shown wonderful improvement after treatment.⁴

Regarding Javanese labour, perhaps Graham Kerr was thinking of a visit paid to the New Hebrides in early 1925 by an Inspector of the Labour Bureau of the Government of the Netherlands, East Indies, to inspect Javanese coolies on the French plantations. The Inspector told Smith-Rewse he '... was advising ... his government that the introduction of Javanese labourers into the New Hebrides should be allowed to continue—both for British and French settlers—under certain conditions'. Smith-Rewse suggested that the question should be looked at by the Western Pacific High Commission.⁵

The background to Colonial Office's refusal to agree to the introduction of Javanese labour, was based on objections of the Commonwealth Government 'who', wrote Eyre Hutson on 25 August 'naturally are unwilling that a large body of Asiatics should be brought into close proximity to Australia'. He added the rider that

... it is possible that the same objections, as advanced in regard to Chinese and Tonkinese, may not have the same weight when applied to the introduction of Javanese into the New Hebrides in that, geographically, Java is as near to the shores of Australia as are the New Hebrides.⁶

Hutson views were at odds with the White Australia Policy which, in its own way, was as ironclad as the policy of the Colonial Office towards New Hebrides. The Australian Government would not be likely to see things his way but it needs to be realised that Vila was 1700 miles away from Sydney. The New Hebrides Group, separated from Australia by New Caledonia, was thus not just off-shore.

Graham Kerr's diary says that on 8 July the French aviso *Aldebaran* paid yet another visit to the Group from Noumea and, on the same day, *Makambo* came back from the North with Alsopp on board.⁷ He was going to Australia from Turtle Bay for two months. Graham Kerr himself was going to Tongoa on *Makatea* which had just arrived from Sydney. When they reached Tongoa they delivered 'close on 17 tons of copra' to *Makatea*. As Kerr told Johnston, business at Tongoa was booming.

Bringing Tongoa account books with him, Graham Kerr arrived back in Vila on *White Heather* on 18 July and the same night attended 'a French Ball at Reid's place ... No music worth having'. For my father who loved dancing, this would have ruined it. On 22 July accompanied by Mr and Mrs Jocteur he went to Mr Rimbert's place to see the cacao drying system there and, next day, went to the Jocteur's place at Mélé where he had breakfast. 'The most comfortable place I have seen in the Islands.'

Before leaving for Sydney on *Dupleix* on 26 July he sold 'Tongoa shell to Ballandes'. While in Noumea he 'had an interview with *Maison de Béchade* re copra etc'. And before leaving for Sydney he 'arranged with French Bank to transfer 40000 francs to our credit in Paris'. He must have enjoyed a Ball at the Hotel de la Gare, held the night before he left on 5 August. He wrote that it was 'a Brilliant affair'.

Back in Sydney Graham Kerr saw

Mr. Mitchell of B.P. and Co. on 20 August re copra contract and labour for New Hebrides. Every effort had to be made to get labour from *somewhere* and perhaps B.P. just might be able to help.

On 17 September he went on a trial run on the launch he had bought for the *Compagnie Cotonnière* from the boat-builder Holmes at Lavender Bay, Sydney and found it very satisfactory. Yet another occupation of Kerr Brothers, Island Merchants, was finding holiday places for clients from New Hebrides. He went up to Katoomba on such a mission for the Jocteurs on 2 October.

He had intended to return to the New Hebrides on *Dupleix* on 21 October but a Captain Pascal who had accepted employment with the Kerrs could not be ready in time. He also had to 'see about supplies of cacao for which we have large orders' so he decided to send Louis Vautier from the Sydney office instead. J.D. Nicolson also went to New Hebrides to work on *Lunawanna*. Graham Kerr was also busy trying to find suitable draft mares for Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu—going here there and everywhere to find suitable ones.

And all the time he was seriously considering the idea of selling out the family interests in the New Hebrides. As he wrote to D.H. Kerr in Santo on 17 November: 'We are not getting any younger and do not want to be tied down all our lives'. He told his brother that 'French people are putting up the money for big companies out this way' and he instanced the *Compagnie Cotonnière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*

with something like 10,000,000 frs. capital ... With our place and Petersen's it would be a great thing with the ready-made plantations and almost unlimited scope for development and the best harbour in New Hebrides.

He had written to Mr My again:

The time is ripe I think and if we let it go, we may 'miss the bus' ... The place would have to be properly planned out by a surveyor if possible, showing coastline from My's to Shark Bay, and with ours and Petersen's property, and showing the general lie of the country at back. Plans would require to show areas already planted in coconuts, cacao and cotton ... There is value there and I think there is more prospect of doing business in France.

He left for New Hebrides on 28 November taking in his luggage 300 pounds in silver for Tongoa.⁸ While in Noumea, Graham Kerr delivered a violin to Gautiers at Anse Vata on account of Javilier. Kerr Brothers services certainly ranged wide. He was back in Vila by 7 December and ensconced in Hotel Moderne. Louis Vautier had also just arrived from Santo and with Graham Kerr he inspected various sources of cacao at Rimbert's, Rossi's and Rollande's. The next day they walked to Mélé, there and back, to see Leeman's cacao: a 'long walk' according to Kerr's diary. On 14 December *Dupleix* arrived in Vila from the north with Mr and Mrs My on board on their way to France.⁹ Mr Vautier and Theo Thomas were also passengers to Sydney.

Graham Kerr decided to leave for Tongoa by the Cooperative Company's cutter on 17 December. He wanted to check on the Store and do the books. While he was there Chris Hill's vessel came in from Vila and George Crocker's cutter from Epi to trade. *Lunawanna* also arrived from Santo. The vessel went across to Epi to pick up a horse from Naturel's which Fox had previously bought. This was on Christmas Eve: '*Lunawanna* due back that night. No sign of her'. On Christmas Day the 'natives down singing soon after daylight,' and Graham Kerr was busy in the Store and watching for *Lunawanna* which 'returned in the evening. The horse died on the way. They foolishly left it on deck with no protection'.

The natives from different villages were still singing and dancing on Boxing Day and as a consequence Kerr was kept busy in the store. Mr Fox was getting ready to leave for Turtle Bay on *Lunawanna* with his son Leslie and daughter Dorothy. His wife and other son were to stay and look after the Store while Graham Kerr accompanied *Lunawanna* to Vila to collect his mail. They left Tongoa on 27 December going via Émaé and Havannah Harbour where they found *Makatea* at anchor so Graham Kerr took a passage to Vila on her, and *Lunawanna* could thus sail immediately to Santo. On the last day of 1925 Graham Kerr was

... invited to a party at the British Residency in the evening. Dancing, Bridge etc. Saw the old year out and the new year in. Mr and Mrs Smith-Rewse made a very enjoyable party of it.

During the 1925 how had the administration of New Hebrides fared?

Judge de Vere's run-in with Merton King and his criticism of the role of F.E. Wallace did not die down with King's departure. From a note—signed by a person named Young—on the front of a confidential despatch from Smith-Rewse to the Western Pacific High Commissioner on 4 December 1924 another viewpoint was raised:

Quite apart from any aspersions at him by Mr de Vere, Mr Wallace's position seems to me to be somewhat hybrid. Correspondence relating to his appointment might make the position clear; so far as I can gather, he acts as a legal Adviser to the Resident Commissioner for 50 pounds per annum and [has] an office in the government buildings. The post is not given in the Civil List ... [Mr Wallace's status is] shrouded in mystery.¹⁰

There is no doubt that Wallace had close connections with the Australian Government. He had, for example, asked the Solicitor-General, Sir Robert Garran, for his opinion on the Clapcott murder. De Vere thought Wallace had influenced King and 'nearly led to a miscarriage of justice'. He thought that 'Wallace's position as an attaché of the British Residency in an official or semi-official capacity does not sit well with his job as solicitor practicing before the Courts here'.

De Vere was a very prickly person. This can be seen at the time when Smith-Rewse denied him the use of his personal yacht *Euphrosyne* to visit Santo in connection with Clapcott's estate. In fact the generally-relaxed Smith-Rewse advised that after de Vere went on leave 'his appointment should not be renewed'.¹¹

A confidential letter from S.M. Bruce, Australian Prime Minister to Leo Amery, the Secretary of State Colonial Office, on 23 February 1925 revealed the exact position held by Wallace, solicitor in New Hebrides for the past 12 years

... who acts as our representative in connection with the fairly extensive land interests that we have there and keeps us informed as to what is going on.

It could not have been more clearly stated. During Merton King's term of office Wallace was accorded a certain status and was given precedence at certain government functions, to which de Vere had strongly objected. Prime Minister Bruce hoped that Amery:

... could see his way clear for these privileges to continue. Greatly appreciated by Mr Wallace and enabled him to carry out his duties better as far as the Commonwealth was concerned.¹²

The Western Pacific High Commissioner, now Sir Eyre Hutson, advised Smith-Rewse privately 'that he should do what he can to meet the Commonwealth Government's wishes'. This as de Vere had averred showed the too close connection of the Australian government with the New Hebrides which was a joint British and French Condominium government.¹³

The 'fairly extensive land interests' referred to by Prime Minister Bruce had earlier been acquired to try and catch up with French colonisation. Very few of the many Australian colonists originally attracted to the Group now remained. This was not only because they had not got a fair deal from Burns Philp and Company—which administered the land for the Commonwealth Government—but because the Commonwealth itself was not prepared to help British settlers in any way. Its sole aim was to get the French out. The British New Hebrides Association had also unsuccessfully tried to get some of this unused land released for sale to other settlers.

Thus some of the matters raised by de Vere were very touchy and controversial for others. He had dared to attack Colonial Office policy for the New Hebrides which tacitly included Australia, Burns Philp and Company and the New Hebrides Mission, although none of these had been mentioned in the official agreement drawn up between England and France in 1906. This is why de Vere's chances of continuing in the job as British Judge to the Joint Court looked so slim.

On 18 August 1925 Captain Clifford C. Francis, seconded from the Solomons Islands Protectorate, took the position of Acting British Judge to the Joint Court in De Vere's absence.¹⁴ De Vere was

transferred to Cyprus on 26 October 1925 and Francis took over the job on a permanent basis there being nobody else available with suitable qualifications.¹⁵

In order that the British Judge would know exactly where he stood, Sir Eyre Hutson suggested on 11 November that the Judge

... be required to advise the High Commissioner through the Resident Commissioner on matters relating to the jurisdiction of the Courts, and the laws, regulations etc. deemed to be in force in the New Hebrides as to their application, and in other matters of a *non-contentious* nature.¹⁶

This was a tall order, particularly to a man not trained in French law as well as British. This was also the case with Wallace who graduated in law through Sydney University. He was the only British lawyer practicing in the New Hebrides at this time. Edward Jacomb, a graduate of both the Inner Temple London and with a *Licence en Droit* from Paris had left the Group in 1919. He had had a rough ride with the French who feared him and with the Western Pacific High Commission which did not like his forthright criticism of their policy for the New Hebrides. Like de Vere he had 'rocked the boat'. Now, like all other British settlers who had relied on Jacomb, the Kerr Brothers had to turn to Wallace. Lack of a barrister versed in both British and French law helped to make the already precarious situation of British settlers in the New Hebrides even more so.

Smith-Rewse had certainly inherited a difficult job and lack of labour for British subjects was not the least of his difficulties. It had been thought with the introduction of Indo-Chinese coolies for the French that they would not bother with Indigenous labour, but it had made no appreciable difference.

On 4 January 1925, L. Roche of Undine Bay wrote to Smith-Rewse:

... in reference to our conversation on the recruiting of native labour, my schooner was out recruiting from the 15th July to 28th October 1924, during this period recruiting twelve natives, which cost 19 pounds 18 shillings and 3 pence each. I have 514 acres under coconuts and cotton and at present I have only 18 labourers to work it with, consequently most of the coconuts are lost for the want of labour to gather them ... labour is getting more difficult to procure every year.

This was followed on 10 January by another protest from Neville Ussher also of Undine Bay. In his opinion 'the British settlers cannot continue to carry on under the regulations controlling the recruiting of labour. The recruiting of native labour is too costly and too uncertain and the supply inadequate and ... becoming worse each year'.

Ussher said that he could employ 50 labourers, the general average being 10, but he has been down to two and had to get the work done by contract which was very unsatisfactory and very costly. He owned three pieces of land with 50 acres of bearing coconuts on one. On another, he manufactured as much copra as possible by contract, 'while the cotton growing on one has been entirely neglected ... the ground ... overgrown with scrub and lantana... May I be allowed to suggest that the only remedy is that the British settlers be allowed to import foreign labour as the French do?'¹⁷

Before receiving Ussher's letter, Smith-Rewse had written to the Western Pacific High Commissioner on 5 January on the matter. He compared the situation in the Solomons with that of the New Hebrides and wanted the whole question of labour for British subjects reviewed. He submitted that

... the local British settler is ... as reputable a person and as law abiding a subject as his brother settler in the neighbouring Protectorate ... The natives of the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides are both Melanesians, living very similar lives, and what can be allowed to one, should do no harm to the other... It is a better policy to allow the women to go under regular conditions of employment than for them to accompany their husbands and guardians without having any legitimate occupation on the plantation

If the wives accompanied their husbands more freely, family life would not be so liable to be broken up.

Smith-Rewse's letter roused more interest than usual and the Secretary to the High Commissioner, H.G. Pilling, added a long note to the front of it giving the history of the prohibition of employment of female labour from the beginning and concluded that

... so far as I can find in the file there is no record whether prohibition of the employment of females in any form of labour, improved the moral position, as intended, or not. It is improbable, however that the Secretary of State will agree to open the question.

Another official with initials H.G.L. said he 'would prefer to await the arrival of Sir Eyre Hutson', the New High Commissioner, before addressing the Secretary of State. H.G.L. thought Smith-Rewse had

... made out a strong case and ... would be prepared to support him in his recommendation ... Extravagant charges have been laid against the French in this connection and I have seen it stated in the Australian Press that they use the recruitment of women as baits for recruiting male labourers, women being indiscriminately shared by the latter.¹⁸ These statements are probably largely exaggerated, emanating as they do from the Australian Presbyterian Mission whose bias against all French Methods are extreme ... It would be difficult to argue why in one Protectorate we permit the employment of woman and in another refuse it.

Later in the year, on 10 November, Sir Eyre Hutson sent the following to the Secretary of State Colonial Office, the

Resident Commissioner has stated his opinion that labour conditions generally in the Condominium are vastly improved ... and that the abuses are unlikely to occur in the event of an amendment of the law ... In these circumstances I have no objection to offer to the change, and I recommend for your approval the amendment of Section 11 of King's Regulation No. 1 of 1913.

In reference to another letter from Smith-Rewse dated 5 August on the subject of Asiatic labour, Hutson stated that during his brief visit to the New Hebrides he:

... was impressed with the appearance of the Tonkinese labourers working in Vila ... With the overwhelming advantage the French planters now possess over their British competitors, in the ability to supplement the local labour supply with such Asiatics, it is easy to understand how the view is generally accepted by British officials at Vila and others, that the day is fast approaching when British planters will be forced, against their will, to sink their interests in French Companies or to leave the Group.¹⁹

Smith-Rewse was left in no doubt as to what British planters thought of their situation. F.J. Fleming wrote to him on 20 March from Bushman's Bay Malekula giving an account of his recruiting activities, as Smith-Rewse had himself suggested.

Our vessel recruited 11 natives for one year (one has since died) at a cost of 600 pounds and 3 shillings. This works out at 54 pounds, 11 shillings and two pence to recruit a labourer for one year's work. You will see by these figures that the cost of recruiting is becoming prohibitive for the British planter in this Group and that unless something is done to reduce this expense by way of importation of labour it will be impossible for the British planter to carry on...

I hope you will be successful in making the Home Government realise the seriousness of the labour situation in this Group.

Then on 4 July D. Barclay of Sassuli Plantation, Malo, asked Smith-Rewse 'if he could give [him] any assurance about future supply and importation of outside labour as ... the end of local labour is at hand. My schooner arrived back from Malekula yesterday with no recruits, although well equipped to do so'. Barclay had a crop of cotton ready for picking but not enough labour.

What made it worse for British subjects was to see the 'periodic arrival of *St Francois Xavier* with Chinese'. Barclay thought his French co-settlers must be 'having a big smile on us'. He too hoped that Smith-Rewse would 'champion our side'.²⁰

Another letter on the matter came from Graham Kerr for Kerr Bros. of Sydney. As referred to in the diary part of this chapter my father not only wrote to Smith-Rewse but visited him in Vila.

We beg to bring before you the grave situation we and other British planters are in, as regards a continued supply of labour for plantation work, and we would urge your recommendation to the High Commissioner or the Colonial Office that British settlers be permitted to bring in outside labour under indenture. We have no doubt that a plentiful supply ... could be obtained from Java and we believe the Dutch Government is favourable to it. Reasonable conditions could be imposed for the proper treatment during indenture period and for repatriation at the end of the term. We would suggest a five-year agreement.

We consider that this matter is one of the very greatest importance to British interests here. Local labour is fast becoming a thing of the past... It is probable that conditions imposed by New Zealand in regard to outside labour for Samoa would be suitable here.

The very reasonableness of these letters caused Smith-Rewse to enclose them with the following confidential despatch he sent to Hutson on 29 July:

The question is one which becomes more acute each month ... It is a matter of such great importance to the British trader and planter that I consider that I should be failing in my duty if I did not continue to stress the urgency of the question to the best of my ability ... Should assistance not be forthcoming it will be only a short time before the British settler will have to look elsewhere to enable him to carry on his plantation.

Graham Kerr would have been very frank when he visited Smith-Rewse, who told Hutson,

... there were two alternatives [1] the British plantation owner would sell his holding to one of the French companies [2] or form a company with the aid of French partners and capital, which would then be registered under French laws ... The British planter is naturally strongly adverse to adopting such a course of procedure but, as several have pointed out to me, 'what alternative have they?'... The French settler is fully aware of the situation and to my own knowledge offers have been made already to more than one British owner to convert his plantation into a French company.

Smith-Rewse ended with this strong plea:

If British settlers are obliged, in one way or another, to dispose of their interests to the French, then the prospects for the future of the New Hebrides native will indeed be black.²¹

Perhaps he thought this last would have some effect on the Colonial Office which always said the interests of the Indigenous people were a major consideration. But located in distant England the Colonial Office also had a rock-solid policy worked out for the New Hebrides to suit its own best interests.

The question of disease being introduced to the Group by Asiatic labour had been raised but on 13 November Smith-Rewse tried to lay the question to rest:

The duration of the voyage from Saigon is sufficiently long to permit any disease being discovered before arrival. [French Health Officials] are punctilious in the execution of inspections. Also Dr Lambert of the Rockefeller Foundation, who made a five month visit to the Group in 1925, thought that all Asiatics should be treated on arrival for hookworm and other parasites.

To strengthen his case Smith-Rewse noted a decided change in the view formerly held by the New Hebrides Mission during their 1925 Synod, held at Tangoa in July. They 'only suggest certain safeguards if they are allowed to be brought here'. The Reverends F.G. Bowie, Macmillan, and M. Frater were behind the above resolution.

Smith-Rewse, who was to attend a meeting of the New Hebrides British Association, sent off a telegram to Hutson on 9 September wanting 'to be in a position to hold out some hopes of assistance' to British settlers and 'also amendment of Kings Reg. No 1 of 1913 ... as the present situation is serious for them and British interests generally'.²²

Smith-Rewse had attended the New Hebrides Mission synod and he told Hutson on 5 August that he was of the opinion

... that the French authorities are tending more to cooperate with ourselves in preventing the small troubles which arise from time to time between some of the small planters and traders and the natives in their vicinity.²³

The problem was compounded by Islanders taking their problems to the New Hebrides Mission. Here Smith-Rewse commented 'that the members of the Mission only hear one side of the case' adding that 'the South Sea Islander is apt at times to make statements which are open to considerable modification on enquiry'.²⁴ He wished the four Administrative districts with their British and French District Agents, as provided for in the Protocol of 1914 were up and running: 'When they are fully established a very rapid improvement should take place'.

On 21 February Smith-Rewse forwarded to the Western Pacific High Commissioner a copy of a joint decision proclaiming certain islands to be Administrative Districts. He wanted a review after two years but the French wanted them to be only temporary and kept stalling on their final decision.²⁵

There were also problems getting a house built for the French District Agent on Tanna. J.M Nicol, the British District Agent, already had a house at Lenakel which was also to be made a Port of Entry, which would be a benefit to shipping. Before that all ships had had to call first at Vila.²⁶ The French wanted a similar house at Lenakel for their District Agent

Merton King had agreed to its construction on 27 October 1924, in order that the Estimates for 1925 would not be held up. But it was not easy to get it built. Smith-Rewse probably did not know about the strife between the French and the New Hebrides Mission in 1913 when William Wilkes, the British Government Agent on Tanna, had intervened on the side of the French, leaving the New Hebrides Mission very disgruntled. The Mission was now using its influence over their local converts, who refused to help build the house. Smith-Rewse told them in the presence of Reverend Macmillan that 'there was no such thing as a French or a British Government in the New Hebrides but a Condominium Government and it was the duty of all to assist the Government Representatives irrespective of nationality'.

He told the Western Pacific High Commissioner on 29 August that 'a slight difficulty has existed ... and may arise again in the future' but if the French 'appoint a man of tact and character I am confident that friction will not arise'.²⁷ No mention of tact on the part of the New Hebrides Mission however.

It is possible that a part of the problem for the New Hebrides Mission might have been that there were more Islanders on Tanna who outright rejected Mission teachings preferring their own.

Throughout the year efforts were made to get the Native Courts, as stipulated by an Article of the Protocol of 1914, established. As adultery, witchcraft, perjury and incest were to be included among Native Civil Offences radical changes were called for in Islander culture.

The Chief Judicial Commissioner of the Western Pacific High Commission whose duty it was to see that the Article became law was worried about such things as witchcraft being incorporated. He wanted to know if there was a native expression for witchcraft and sorcery. What was the native definition of incest and how could a Native Court decide when an Islander had perjured himself? All these 'sins' were alien to the Indigenous culture and really designed to wipe it out and substitute a Western one instead. The apathy noticed by so many in the beleaguered New Hebridean Islanders at this time had surely to do with the fact that their white rulers considered Indigenous beliefs as beneath consideration.

Dr Lambert in a report added another slant to the Indigenous question:

A few islands are largely Christian in the South Sea sense of the word, but the Melanesian of the New Hebrides is a hard-headed individual who has not, on the whole, yielded readily to Christian influence. He has also been confused in his mind by a Government by two nationalities; and he finds it difficult to understand the competition on some islands by several different missions, each to save his soul in a different way.²⁸

In writing this Lambert was in no way disparaging the work of the missions but thought they should all have their own zones of influence.

Smith-Rewse tried early in the year to get his French colleague to agree to as many as possible of the Protocol of 1914 Native Court recommendations. The French Resident 'experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining a definite reply ... from the High Commissioner for France, but hopes to in a few days'. He eventually agreed to courts being established in the southern islands and some of the central ones.

The Article setting up the courts had stipulated that the High Commissioners cause the collection of native laws and customs to be made with the purpose of preparing a code of native law, both civil and penal. This would naturally be a slow process and a bone of contention to certain white people of that time who liked to think the Islanders had no laws or civilization as such. Gradually the Islanders were getting champions in anthropological circles but in those times colonialism was not a dirty word and its evils were not generally recognised.

Smith-Rewse in a letter to Western Pacific High Commissioner on 11 February stated that a code of native law was not necessary in the Central and Southern islands. 'All the inhabitants have for many years been under the Mission influence with the exception of Tanna where half the population of 5800 remain heathen.'²⁹ Native courts had been in force there since 1912.

Smith-Rewse thought that all that remained was for these courts to be brought into line with the new code. Nevertheless, as no native could be arrested without the agreement of the District Agents, where would that leave the Mission which, particularly on Tanna, used its 'followers' to persecute the 'heathens' in the Courts to make them toe the New Hebrides Mission line. Here is strong evidence of the power exerted by the New Hebrides Mission which held no legal position in the Condominium and explains its unwillingness to countenance the appointment of a French District Agent on Tanna or to build him a house. Perhaps too this explained the delay in French agreement to Native Courts.

Smith-Rewse, as a man of his time, was 'surprised at the degree of intelligence among the people—far higher than I anticipated in a Melanesian group of islands and undoubtedly due to the strong strain of Polynesian blood in many of them'. On Epi, he wrote, many inhabitants were 'only nominally under Mission influence' but he thought that parts of Ambrym would soon be ready for the introduction of the code but not 'the wilder islands such as Santo and Malekula'.

Smith-Rewse was, like Merton King, deeply interested in the problems of the Indigenous people. In his Annual Report for New Hebrides for 1924 he wrote it was 'almost impossible to put the blame on any one particular cause' for the decline in the Indigenous population. The same thing had occurred in other island groups of the South Pacific. But

... after a certain point has been reached, the decline has ceased and an upward movement taken place ... After the first ill effects of coming into contact with Europeans and an entirely different type of civilization, the native inhabitants have adapted themselves to the new manner of living and once more regained interest in life with beneficent results to themselves.³⁰

He also stressed the importance of medical treatment and education and he would not have meant what the New Hebrides Mission meant by education which was purely religious.

A scheme had been proposed that Islanders be trained as medical students in Fiji and the French Resident D'Arboussier agreed. Smith-Rewse thought that if Native Medical Practitioners could be provided by the Fiji government and stationed with the District Agents they would be invaluable in starting a small medical organisation in the interest of the New Hebrideans. He thought the 1925 visit of Dr Lambert of the Rockefeller Foundation had influenced the French to agree to the proposal. Lambert provided a report on his findings some of which I quoted earlier.³¹

On 20 November Smith-Rewse presented a half-yearly report on the recruiting of native labour up till 30 June 1925. Only 328 labourers recruited, 50% down on the previous year. The Islanders were now growing their own cotton because of the good prices obtained. Smith-Rewse submitted that

... the growing of their own crops is more beneficial to the native than going away to work on plantations, but it undoubtedly makes the position harder for the settlers. At present approximately 1900 Indo-Chinese coolies are employed in the Group, many finished their tour of engagement and been repatriated but more are arriving.

The situation as regards the British settlers remains as serious as ever... One British plantation has recently been converted into a French company and if no assistance is forthcoming I believe others will be compelled to follow this example.³²

Lack of labour was only one of the problems to be confronted. The cost of living in the New Hebrides had risen 53% since 1914 and the exchange rate between sterling and the franc continued to fluctuate. On 24 April the local rate was 90F to the pound sterling. This caused problems when drawing up Condominium Estimates and on 23 April Smith-Rewse advised the Western Pacific High Commissioner that 'at the present time the Estimates are drawn up on two entirely different systems'. New regulations must be drawn up and he suggested for Hutson's serious consideration 'that to obtain the concurrence of the French to the new system of financial management, it is not advisable to insist too rigorously on our own methods'.

He and his colleague M. de la Vaissière had agreed that M. Mayet the present Treasurer and Post Master to the Condominium should hold the post of Cashier; a new post being created for the Accountant. Although this meant more expenditure Smith-Rewse hoped that the High Commissioner would agree.³³

The Western Pacific High Commission was always inclined to regard the New Hebrides in the same way as a British Protectorate. With only 296 people in the Group under the British Regime as against 2,352 under the French one—according to the Annual Report of 1924—cooperation was necessary, not rigidity.³⁴

On 7 December the Secretary of State Colonial Office advised that Count de Buena Esperanza was on his way back to the New Hebrides. To get him to the point of actual return, the British and French governments had agreed to give him 'a ticket to London and a small sum for travelling expenses'. Esperanza's return had been delayed so often that it had come to be regarded as rather a joke. As far back as 16 February 1925 the Secretary of State Colonial Office had announced his 'anticipated return', about which H.J. Pilling, Secretary to the Western Pacific High Commissioner, had this to say:

The correspondence in this file is one of the lighter episodes in the New Hebrides tragedy. The attempts to get the Spanish Count de Buena Esperanza who is about 75 years of age and has been on leave for 9 years since 1916, to return to his post as President of the Joint Court in the New Hebrides and his promises to do so, coupled with requests for further advances, are not without humour. There are however grounds for suspicion that

he may be supported in his procrastination by the French who are unwilling that the work of the Land Court should be resumed.³⁵

Esperanza was returning to a depleted Joint Court. Dr Borgesius the Public Prosecutor, who had been acting in Esperanza's place since 1916 and was at present on leave, announced on 20 October that he had accepted the post of Legal Councillor to the Turkish Government. His resignation was to take place immediately.³⁶ This left the Court with a staff of two Judges and one Clerk.

As far as British settlers were concerned the long closure of the Joint Court aroused frustration and anger rather than mirth. The salaries for its officials were so low that they could find no takers and, anyway, why should any officials it did have be paid when they did nothing.

Other British subjects with long service in the New Hebrides were also asking for salary increases this year. These included F.E. Johnson, now employed in the Solomons, and E.G. Seagoe who had given long and valuable service to the Condominium but now, discouraged at his lack of prospects, had asked for a transfer. On his present salary, paid in francs, he could not afford to educate his two children in Australia. The obvious job for him would have been that of Assistant British Resident.

1925 ended with nothing solved and no sign that the Colonial Office would alter its draconian policy towards British subjects in the New Hebrides.

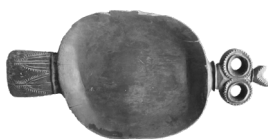
I can now understand my father's seething indignation. At that time I was much too young to know anything about the New Hebrides but later, when I was old enough to be aware, the difference to others in outlook he showed on just about everything worried me. It was so unlike the comparatively easy-going outlook of the fathers of my Australian friends.

Life in the Condominium was indeed a tragi-comedy not only for its Indigenous people but for everybody who lived or made their living there, not least for Arthur Bernard Deacon a brilliant 22-year-old graduate of Trinity College Cambridge, who arrived in Vila on the last day of 1925 and stayed with Smith-Rewse in Vila before taking up residence at South West Bay, Malekula. His deep interest in anthropology would last until his death from black-water fever on 12 March 1927 just before he was due to take up a lectureship in Anthropology at Sydney University.³⁷

Endnotes

- 1 This was William Torrie Robertson—always called Robbie—who would soon work for the Kerrs at Turtle Bay and later at Hog Harbour.
- 2 R.J. Aldington first worked for the Oceanic Rubber Planting and Trading Co. at Port Patteson Vanua Lava in the Banks Group but was now working for the Kerrs.
- 3 For the letter my father wrote to Smith Rewse 23 July 1924 see WPHC 2072/1925. It was one of five letters from Roche, Ussher, Fleming, Barclay and Kerr Bros. used by Smith Rewse to strengthen his plea to the WPH Cmr. for British subjects to be allowed to use foreign labour.
- 4 Dr S.M. Lambert, belonging to the International Health Board of the Rockefeller Foundation, spent May-Sept 1925 in the New Hebrides during which time he compiled a full report on the Group including a Health Survey with special reference to the hook-worm disease. He praised both British and French Resident Commissioners—Smith-Rewse and D'Arboussier for their cooperation. William Lockhart Bell and J.M. Nicol were also mentioned as being very helpful. He also gained the full support of the NHM. Planters both British and French were also very helpful and hospitable including F.J. Fleming of Metevan Plantations, Bushman's Bay, Malekula and Bladinières of Mélé. See WPHC 2494/1925.
- 5 WPHC 584/1925, Smith-Rewse to WPH Cmr, 11 Feb 1925. In another letter in the same record dated 5 July, Smith-Rewse wrote 'If the introduction of Asiatic labourers was prohibited to the French as well as the British the case would be different. I venture to suggest ... that the British settler and British interests should have the same privileges and opportunities'.
- 6 WPHC 584/1925, Hutson to Smith-Rewse 25 Aug 1925.
- 7 On a previous visit in March 1925, *Aldebaran* had brought M. D'Arboussier back to Vila to take up his job as French Resident from M. de la Vaissière. He had been acting French High Commissioner after the departure of Jules Repiquet. See WPHC 817/1925.
- 8 Merton King in his report for 1923, issued 27 May 1924 wrote that there was no lack of coin in circulation during the year, all in British silver in which nearly all transactions with natives are conducted, even by French business houses and traders. Export of silver coin was still prohibited. See WPHC 1573/1924.
- 9 After the death of their youngest son Richard in April 1925, I think his parents decided to go back to Paris where their eldest son Frédéric lived, leaving their second son, Jean, to manage the plantations on Santo. F.J. Rimbart then became manager of *Société Coopérative* in Emile My's place.
- 10 WPHC 3151/1924, includes the next two quotations.
- 11 WPHC 2547/1924.
- 12 WPHC 2345/1925.
- 13 In fact the connections were even worse as Smith-Rewse's assistant, Sir George Joy, had recently married Wallace's daughter.
- 14 WPHC 975/1925.
- 15 WPHC 2369/1925.
- 16 WPHC 2459/1925.
- 17 For Roche's and Ussher's letters see WPHC 2072/1925: included with three other later written letters on the same subject. Smith-Rewse to Hutson 29 July 1925.
- 18 It needs to be realised that marriage as such did not exist in the Indigenous culture. Women were property. They did all the manual labour and could be bought and sold as their owner wished.
- 19 See WPHC 214/1925, Smith-Rewse to Hutson 5 Jan 1925, Re Employment of female native labourers by British planters in the New Hebrides. Recommends that section 11 of King's Reg. No. 1 of 1913 be amended. This record contains copies of all the relevant regulations.
- 20 What Hutson told the Sec of State C.O. in his despatch of 10 Nov about British planters forced, against their will, to sell out to the French, or leave the Group, was not wrong. Barclay would eventually fit into both categories.
- 21 See WPHC 2072/1925 which includes the five letters mentioned in the text.
- 22 Included in the preceding record, WPHC 2072/1925.
- 23 An example of this is to be found in a letter Zeitler to Smith-Rewse 1 Dec. 1925. He had originally approached Merton King in 1922 about trouble he was having with the Islanders of Paia—near the plantation of Mapuna—caused by a 'teacher' Suparbo. He had asked King to call, but the visit did not take place. See PMB 1091 Adolphus Zeitler Correspondence, 1899-1935.
- 24 WPHC 2085/1925.
- 25 WPHC 575/1925.
- 26 WPHC 582/1925.
- 27 WPHC 2364/1925.
- 28 For Lambert's 41 page report on all aspects of the New Hebrides question see WPHC 2494 /1925.

- 29 WPHC 585/1925. This record gives the full code of native offences both Civil and Penal. Of the Adultery, Witchcraft and Perjury and Incest 'crimes'. All of them outrageous in an Indigenous context—A. K. Young—Chief Judicial Commissioner of the WPHC had a few reservations, particularly regarding Perjury, a difficult question for a native court to decide. Incest was another.
- 30 WPHC 2094/1925. There is an interesting note on the front of this report added by the High Commissioner's Secretary, H. Vaskess. Unlike Smith Rewse, he 'was unaware that a "type of civilization" existed in the New Hebrides prior to the advent of the Europeans'. Such a glib remark which would cause much eye brow raising these days when the evils of colonialism have been recognised, would not have had such a reception in 1924. In the previous Annual report of 1923 (WPHC 1573/1924) Merton King had brought up the ideas of the anthropologist, Dr Rivers, on the subject of population decline which he attributed to the 'unintelligent and indiscriminating action of Europeans towards native institutions'. Perhaps this prompted Vaskess' remark?
- 31 For Lambert's very full report on all aspects of the New Hebrides See endnotes 4 and 28 above.
- 32 WPHC 3003/1925. I do not know which British plantation he refers to. It is not Turtle Bay as that was not sold until 1927.
- 33 See WPHC 1211/1925 and WPHC 1214/1925.
- 34 For New Hebrides Annual Report for 1924 see WPHC 2094/1925.
- 35 WPHC 628/1925. French and Spanish law were not so different and the accusation not unbelievable.
- 36 See WPHC 1998/1925, WPHC 2346/1925 and WPHC 2799/1925.
- 37 A short biography of A. B. Deacon was intended to be in a Glossary of Names which was not prepared by Katherine Cawsey (ed.)



Chapter 8 1926: The *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelle Hébrides* Spells Trouble

1926 marked the high-point of my father's career and, although he did not yet know it, the beginning of the end.

With the Fox family in process of leaving for Turtle Bay, another man named Beale had been found to take over at Tongoa. Graham Kerr met him on 1 January when *Makambo* arrived from Sydney. They stayed at the Hotel Moderne until they could leave for Tongoa, which they did on 4 January in the *Société Coopérative's* cutter. Here Kerr found that Mrs Fox who was still managing the store had a badly poisoned hand. She was in such pain that when *St Michel* called in next day on its way to Vila my father sent her there to get proper medical attention.

Meantime he had to get Mr Beale into the run of things, including visiting the principal native villages on Tongoa Island. 'We have Carlo from Pahoia with us. First of all called at Paele and called on the Chief. Went to Burow and then on to Salambanga [maybe Selebanga]' and on to Mangarisu on the other side of the island. They came back via Pakoa, not having enough time visit all the villages. 'Of all the places we went to Salambanga is the most impressive'. The long day's walk paid off because the next day crowds of Islanders visited the store.

Kerr was back to Vila by 17 January, making the slow trip in a native boat from Salambanga. He went across to the hospital on Iririki to visit Mrs Fox. It had been hoped that she would be well enough to make the trip north by *Dupleix* to Turtle Bay, where her husband and two of her children now lived, but he found that was not the case. He sent news to Fox that she would come by the next *Makambo*.

On 22 January he went up to the British government offices to see Wallace about land claims and then had dinner with Dr and Mrs Herriott before visiting Mrs Fox in hospital.¹ When *Dupleix* arrived back from the north, D.H. Kerr and his wife were on board on their way to Sydney and my father joined them. 'Glad to get away as the heat has been awful'. He found the heat so bad that he had spent the previous night at 'the French Government Boat shed, but too many cockroaches'.

On arrival in Noumea he was visited at his hotel by Julius Petersen and his son Holly with whom he discussed business matters. Anxious to get home, my father managed to get a passage to Sydney on *Suva* which was leaving before *Dupleix*.

Back in Sydney on 20 February and he was still trying to settle the plantation labour problem. It was arranged that Graham Kerr, Mr and Mrs 'D.H.', Theo Thomas and T.R.F. Salisbury from Hog Harbour, would all go to Gosford, 'primarily to hold a meeting with Barclay, and Hawkesby who are both near Gosford, about the question of outside labour for British plantations in New Hebrides'. It was agreed that Graham Kerr would make full enquiries from the Phosphate Commission as to what it would cost to land about 200 Chinese in New Hebrides. These were the people that supplied Samoa with labour under agreement with the New Zealand Government. He was also to make enquiries about French sources.

All these people wanted to run their plantations as British subjects but seemed to be getting nowhere. As will be seen later in the chapter there was at this very time much discussion between the British and French Governments about the very existence of the Condominium. Would they divide up the Group between them? Would Asiatic labour be permitted? The people who lived there or made

their living in the New Hebrides had no part in these discussions. They could only wait and see what was in store for them. My father while still hoping for the best was making other plans.

On 9 March, Mr and Mrs My, who had been in staying in Noumea, arrived in Sydney on the way to Europe in *Esperance Bay*. They probably discussed a visit by Graham Kerr to Paris if negotiations by My proved successful. He was certainly being drawn in the direction of negotiating with the French about Kerr land in New Hebrides. He made an arrangement with *Messageries Maritimes* on 10 March for *Dupleix* to call at Turtle Bay every second trip, starting in June.

On 23 April he left once again for the islands on *Dupleix*. Hugh and Jane Kerr were also going back with yet another person for the plantation, a man called Seale. Mr and Mrs Seagoe were also passengers.² When they reached Noumea a party from the ship went on a motor trip to Paita followed by a tennis party at Johnstons' afterwards.³ While in Noumea they heard that 'Capt Barrett of the *Euphrosyne* had thrown himself overboard and drowned after heavy drinking and running the *Euphrosyne* ashore on his way to Vila'.⁴

Back in Vila Graham Kerr had a meeting on 6 May with some of the Directors of the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles Hébrides* which wanted him to enable them to close down their operations, otherwise they would have to wait until their July meeting. Emile My had set up the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles Hébrides* in 1917 to help French planters get the best price for their produce and, when the Kerr family left Vila in 1918, Kerr Brothers Store had been leased to the *Société* while the Mys took up residence in Kerr Brothers House. When Emile My left the Group to live in Paris his place as a Director was taken by M. Rimbart.

The next day Graham Kerr called on their French lawyer, Marcel Coursin, about Kerr Brothers rights under the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles Hébrides* lease. On the same day he called on Smith-Rewse about labour for British planters and the answer he got would not have been very encouraging, however hard the Smith-Rewse tried to help them.

In the presence of Coursin, Rimbart, and A.H. Nichols, British Director of Customs under the Condominium, Graham Kerr agreed to the winding up and paying off their debt for breaking the lease. He agreed to take back the Kerr Brothers Store—'they paying 3 months rent from now, we allowing them one month to clear up'. There was to be an immediate stock-take, with Kerr agreeing to give them a hand and to help dispose of stock.

But it was not that easy. While the stock-take was going on Coursin found out that there had not been a quorum at the April meeting of the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles Hébrides* to agree to the winding up and they would indeed have to wait until the July meeting. Graham Kerr heard this news in the presence of Rimbart and Nichols and thought that would not prevent him from asking the Court for permission to resume possession. This would have been the French National Court and on 17 May he called on Coursin with M. Martin, the Condominium Treasurer, who would interpret for him on French law regarding the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles Hébrides*. He concluded 'there would be so many difficulties in bringing the matter before the court that we decided to wait until the *Coopérative* have their meeting in July and wind up voluntarily'. British and French business practices were different as my father was now beginning to realise, but he was not deterred.

Vila was very festive at this time. On 11 May two Australian warships, the *Sydney* and the *Delhi* put in an appearance. On 13 May Graham Kerr was asked 'to play in a Cricket match against the warships but ... they couldn't get a Vila team together' so he went to a tennis match at Burns Philp and Company's instead but 'rain came on and spoilt it'. He 'went to a Ball given by the Vila Dance Club at Reids in the Evening. The Band from one of the warships supplied the music. The Commodore and many officers present. Very enjoyable except that the evening was very warm'. And that was not the end of his socialising. On 23 May there was 'A riding party of five to Devil's Point, Mr and Mrs Seagoe, Miss de Gayon, Thelma Bell and self'. They left Vila at 9 am, had lunch under Klehms' banyan tree and then on to Devil's Point and back by dark.

On 25 May George Crocker arrived from Epi and Graham Kerr sold Kerr's Tongoa interests to him for a thousand pounds plus stock at cost and next day he accompanied Crocker to Tongoa to take stock

and hand over. The new manager Mr Beale was to stay on. He was back in Vila by 30 May. French interest was for property in the northern islands as well as Vila and Tongoa did not fit that category.

Graham Kerr was moving ahead with plans for the future. On 3 June he received a letter from Theo Thomas in Sydney with whom he had been in negotiation since 1924 about an option to buy Hog Harbour plantation. The asking price was now 15 thousand pounds, not 10 thousand—the original price—to be negotiated on a ‘Walk in, Walk out basis’ and included were particulars of exactly what was on offer.⁵

Graham Kerr was not getting rid of Tongoa burden Kerr Brothers in order that the Hog Harbour Plantation would take place. He was engaged in a business venture with a trusted friend of many years, Emile My. Great interest was evinced in Paris in taking over British plantations in the north of the Group from people who had now all but given up hope of getting help from British authorities.

Graham Kerr was noted throughout the Group by both British and French settlers for honesty. He was to act in good faith for Kerr Brothers as well as vendor for other British settlers so inclined, receiving from them first option of sale. The Kerrs would then run their island business from Sydney minus the hassle of being plantation owners. Or so they thought.

At this time everything appeared to be going very well. On 9 June he and Lockhart Bell went out to visit Nichols at Largeau’s old place, Bellevue, up behind Vila and very beautiful. And on 12 June he played tennis at Burns Philp’s in the afternoon followed by a dance at Reids Hotel in the evening. Graham Kerr ‘started it going and Davel and I saw it through. Very successful affair—about 50 being there. We started at 9pm and finished about 1.30 am. The music was the drawback. We had accordion and gramophone’. This was a disappointment for my father who loved dancing so much. And he was not worn out next day either for he, Thelma Bell whom he had known since her childhood and was almost a member of the family, and Mlle. de Gayon went for a ride to the lighthouse at Pango, Graham Kerr riding the Seagoe’s horse.

But he was due to go north in *Dupleix* and he reached Segond Channel on 17 June where he was met by his brother Hugh and Aldington with *Lunawanna*. This was the trip that Graham Kerr had arranged for *Dupleix* where she was to go right to Turtle Bay. As arranged with the ship’s captain, Hugh Kerr was to act as pilot. But as he was ill with fever Graham took on the job, not without some unpleasantness on the part of the new French Commissioner, who had words with Hugh.⁶ The Kerrs probably got a bad mark with *Messageries Maritimes* as a result. Hugh Kerr could get very tetchy.

In *Dupleix*’s launch Graham Kerr towed the punts which were to load and unload. ‘Tide not good at first but the job was finished before noon. We shipped 37 tons copra and 17 of cacao’. *Dupleix* then moved on to Mate Wulu with Graham Kerr and the Fox family following. Here they shipped about 27 tons ‘for us’. Although it was not public knowledge, Julius Petersen was in the process of selling Mate Wulu to the Kerrs. The two plantations, Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu combined, would be a more valuable asset in French eyes.

Graham Kerr then reboarded *Dupleix* for the trip back to Vila and on to Sydney. He could not go ashore at Vila as there was flu on board and they were quarantined. The same thing happened in Noumea where they put in 48 hours at the Quarantine Station before being allowed round to the wharf. Graham Kerr was now suffering from fever and a cold. He reached Sydney on 5 July and celebrated his return by taking his wife to a Ball at the Wentworth in the evening.

On 20 July he received a cable from Emile My in Paris telling him that there were ‘good prospects’ for the New Hebrides properties. This was followed up on 30 July by a letter from Alfred Vigoureux, the Noumea Director of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* telling him that an expert would be going to the New Hebrides by *Dupleix* on 21 August to examine the Kerr Brothers’ properties at Santo with a view to a sale and asking that Kerr Brothers agents furnish all necessary information and place everything at the disposal of their agent.

On 3 August a letter arrived from Julius Petersen in Noumea. He too had received a letter from Vigoureux about the proposed property inspection and was asking to see him. Petersen was presented to a man who was to take over Vigoureux’s job and to his surprise was asked outright to buy Mate Wulu. Petersen, to gain time, said he had already given an option to some other party—no names mentioned. He thought they would have known. I am sure they did, and this approach would later

be the ploy used against the straight-forward Graham Kerr—to his utter disgust—offering behind his back a bribe to try and break options already drawn up between Kerr Brothers and would-be vendors.

Petersen was not impressed: 'It was a sort of superior, threatening, pitying, protective, get-off the grass sort of affaire'. Petersen formerly a Danish subject was now a French citizen whom they felt they could threaten, while Graham Kerr was a British subject. Petersen was going to Mate Wulu with the agent and wanted Kerr to tell him what was going on.⁷

Graham Kerr father replied on 12 August:

We have been moving there, [in Paris, through Emile My] to see what prospect there would be to do business. Vigoureux evidently did not know we were working together... He has a cable to report on our place as well as yours ... However, as far as I understand it, he is asked to report to the interests in France.⁸ I am inclined to think we will be able to do business. That is, if they are prepared to put up the sterling value. The dirty part was sending the registered letter ... to try and frighten you off the earth. That letter must have been sent after they thought you had engaged elsewhere, so as to try and frighten you. I would not lose any sleep over that. But it is a bit dirty. No, they have never tried that game on us, at no time have they made any claim.⁹

Graham Kerr sent Louis Vautier from the Kerr Brothers' Sydney office to Santo to represent him. He thought, if Petersen was agreeable, he himself had better get an option on Mate Wulu drawn up by his solicitor in Sydney immediately and would send down a copy for Petersen to sign. Petersen was in process of moving to Noumea in any case. He was in no way pressured by Graham Kerr who said that Vautier would help him draw it up if he were willing to go ahead. Kerr told Petersen he expected to go to Paris before the end of the year and would like the matter settled as soon as possible.

On 1 September 1926 the option came back, duly signed and witnessed. The asking price was thirty thousand pounds, free of all encumbrances:

The option may be exercised at any time, up to and including the first day of September, one thousand nine hundred and twenty seven by a notice in writing signed by you.¹⁰

Graham Kerr, a man of meticulous honesty, did not then realise the risks involved in dealing with people he did not know far away in Paris and neither did Emile My who was acting for him. In fact future dealings would always be directed from Paris from *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* headquarters—closely allied with the French Minister for Colonies—not from New Hebrides where the Kerrs had many French friends and clients.

On 12 August Kerr wrote to Alfred Vigoureux in reply to his letter of 30 July: 'We were hoping that you would be going on yourself, however, no doubt you will give full instructions to your representative [Lambreaux]'.¹¹

Also up for sale was the valuable Vila property of Kerr Brothers, the store in Rue Higginson and Kerr Brothers House behind it:

Our Mr Vautier is going on and will make the necessary arrangements for your representatives to see the Vila property.

Dupleix left Sydney on 13 August. Vautier's first job was to take over Kerr Brothers Store from the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles-Hébridais* in Vila and to arrange for someone to manage it for the time being. Then he would go on to Santo to meet Lambreaux.

Graham Kerr's future moves were still open and, on 17 August, he attended a meeting of the Island Trade Committee at the Chamber of Commerce in Sydney. I am sure that if there had been even the slightest offer of help to British planters in the New Hebrides he would have been reluctant to go ahead with the, as yet unsigned, French venture. On 11 September Kerr Brothers were licensed by Smith-Rewse

to recruit 100 labourers in *Lunawanna*.¹² *Dupleix* arrived in Sydney on 16 September with 5000 pounds worth of produce for the Kerrs in cacao and coconuts, so some things were progressing favourably.

Many visitors from New Hebrides stayed at the Wentworth Hotel. On 20 September my father collected a Miss Neate who had just returned from the Group and the second captain of the *Dupleix* and took them to our home. 'Kermadec' was always open to visitors from the Islands and Graham noted for his hospitality.¹³

When *Dupleix* departed, among the passengers were C.W. Page and R. Swan who was the son of R.C. Swan (of Swan and Co, Pitt Street). The first mentioned to replace Purcell at Turtle Bay and the second, for outside work.

On 5 October Graham Kerr received a letter from H. Lambreaux, now Noumea Director of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, asking urgently for more information including plans of the property belonging to you in Vila and Santo which D.H. Kerr had not been able to give him when he visited Turtle Bay. He also wanted to know copra, cacao and cotton production figures for 1923, 1924 and 1925, and required a map of the territory for sale including the area covered.

Graham Kerr replied on 21 October. He had already sent off to Lambreaux 'copies of plans and some of the information desired. The returns of copra, cacao and cotton for the past few years have varied considerably as more coconuts and cacao come into bearing each year and we have not been planting cotton'. Lambreaux would have seen the areas planted. Kerr thought that there was no better place for the growing of cacao than the Santo plateau. Copra production for the 12 months to October 1926 was

... just over 200 tons, having gradually worked up year by year to that figure. Cacao, for the [same] 12 months, is approximately 72 tons, the last year showing a very considerable advance. Last year we lost a considerable quantity through wet weather, but with the Gordon Dryer installed, we now lose none. We do not go in for cotton growing except when coconuts are being planted, when we grow cotton between the lines for about 4 years, then cutting it out. The quantity at present is not important, about 200 pounds worth for the year.¹⁴

On 10 November 1926 D.R. Barclay offered my father the option over his Sassuli plantation on the north coast of Malo Island for eleven thousand pounds sterling. He included a map and said that Mat Wells who had a plantation on Malo was also anxious to sell.¹⁵ Barclay ended a letter to Graham Kerr from Gosford dated 11 November. 'I would be pleased if you could settle this great Condominium question by getting a fair price from the French to fly their flag on our places'. He drew attention to the editorial on the Condominium in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for 3 November. 'It was an extra weak one and ended by guessing that the question would be put on the top shelf again for the next Conference'.

On 9 December 1926 Matt Wells granted Kerr Bros first option to buy his property, Sanawoa, on Malo.¹⁶ And on 12 November Theo Thomas also gave Graham Kerr the legal option over his property at Hog Harbour, and also land at the back of Port Olry and the island of Sakau; the price now raised to seventeen thousand pounds. The option was to run until the first day of September 1927.¹⁷ Full of high hopes and buoyed up by the thought of a good business deal with all these options for property which he knew the French wanted, including another from Mat Wells received later on 9 December, a visit to Paris was the next step.

Graham Kerr left for Paris on *Céphée* on 18 November 1926. When he arrived at Marseilles on Boxing Day he was greeted by a letter from Emile My who would meet him in Paris. He had been up most of the previous night 'to see the lights as we approach Marseilles. Entered soon after daylight'.

He left for Paris by rail at 6 am on 28 December not being able to sleep the previous night for excitement at the prospect of seeing Paris for the first time. Paris was the dream-city of many people in the 1920s. He sat with his eyes glued to the window all the way to Paris, sad when it became dark and he could not see out.

Reached 'wonderful Paris' about 7pm where he was greeted by Emile My and his son Frédéric who took him to the Grand Terminus Hotel where they had booked a room for him before taking him out to dinner. 'After dinner I went back to the Hotel—tired. Gay Paris all round me, but I cannot visualise it yet.'

Next day 29 December: 'So this is Paris! Not light until about 7.30, out early and had a look'. He met Mr My later in the morning and discussed business. Emile My made an appointment for 4 pm that day for them 'to meet Charles Revel with whom we are negotiating re property'. He had already met Revel in New Hebrides in 1922.

In the meantime my father went out 'to gaze some more on this wonderful Paris'. Sydney was the biggest city he had known until then. 'The traffic is tremendous and all streets almost alike ... Great big buses, motor cars galore and trams; a continual stream'. He was beginning to find his way about and locating some of the world-famous streets and buildings.

He and Emile My visited Mr Revel in his office in the afternoon. 'They are still waiting for some reports from Vigoureux in Noumea. Graham Kerr could not speak French although he understood most of what was said to him but with his French business partner Emile My to interpret for him, that perhaps did not matter.

He spent the last day of the year wandering round Paris visiting the Galleries Lafayette and the *Grands Magasins de Louvre* to get catalogues to send my mother. He also looked round for different accommodation. 'I am tired of looking around to get a decent place for meals at a reasonable price'. He was lucky and found one near the Eiffel Tower that suited his purposes. He made an interesting comment about the fluctuating franc: 'I think prices must have been put up very much when the franc went something like 246 to the pound sterling and, since then, they forgot to bring prices down, although the franc doubled in value'. Just before midnight, 31 December, he 'strolled down to the Place de la Concorde and watched the passing scene and the passing of the old year. Streams and streams of motors dashing in all directions'. He 'waited there until midnight and the exit of 1926'.

The coming year looked to be full of promise for Graham Kerr.



Photo 28: New Year's Eve party at Kermadec 1926-27—Graham Kerr in Paris at the time. Back row: Alan Mashman, Muriel Kerr (party host), Joyce Kerr, Bruce Mashman, Marjorie, Lucy Edwards (née Hutton). Second Row (some sitting): Lucy Mashman, Peggy Mashman, Lucy Hutton—Grandma Hutton, Len Kerr (4 years), Katherine Kerr, Flora Nicol, Jimmie Nicol, Adrian Edwards. Sitting third row down: Yvonne Edwards, Keith (Mashman?), Beatrice Mashman (née Hutton) holding Neil Mashman, Sheila Mashman, Martin (Edwards?), Margaret Kerr and Rachel (Ray) Nicol. Sitting at the front: Muriel (Gem) Kerr. The names, written in white ink, have faded in the album made for Katherine Kerr by her mother Muriel. Caption from Lindsay Benaud's album where Muriel Kerr's writing is clear and help from Katherine (aged 100).

In New Hebrides at least Count de Buena Esperanza was on his way back to take up his position as President of the Joint Court. He arrived in Vila on 22 February 1926 but with Dr Borgesium's resignation as Public Prosecutor the Court still could not operate.

Another of the vacant positions was filled on 18 January 1926 when Godefried W.J. Persyn, a barrister and Belgian subject, and married with two children, arrived in Vila to take up the duties of

Native Advocate. As he would need a house, this meant more expense for the Condominium Treasury. He was not satisfied with his salary which was paid in francs so his arrival was not without problems.

The main question facing the Colonial Office was what to do about the Condominium which was on its last legs. One suggestion was partition between England and France. Partition under mandate from the League of Nations had been suggested at the Imperial Conference in 1923 which was attended by the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Colonial Secretary, and the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand—S.M. Bruce and W.F. Massey.

A British Member of Parliament, W. Bridgeman, having seen correspondence on the subject of mandate between the Foreign Office and Colonial Office wrote on 12 January 1926 to Leo Amery, Secretary of State Colonial Office, that such an action would constitute a precedent.¹⁸ The territory in question was already subject to the dominion of two members of the League of Nations—England and France. He raised the difficulties of a mandatory system:

The Admiralty are directly concerned since such a system would in most cases prevent us establishing fortifications and Naval bases: a serious matter for an Empire dependent upon overseas bases.

Amery replied that the position in New Hebrides was entirely different from that of a British Colony or Protectorate. He noted that the New Hebrides with the Torres and Banks Groups form

... a region of joint influence as the Protocol of 6th August 1914 puts it, in which each of the two Powers retains sovereignty over its own nationals and over corporations legally constituted according to its law, but neither Power exercises a separate authority over the Group.

Amery said that the idea of partition under mandate was merely a compromise on the part of the Colonial Office

... to meet the views of Bruce who felt that partition pure and simple would raise great trouble with the Australian Missionaries. The Missionaries in Australia (both Presbyterian and Anglican) and in New Zealand too have a very direct interest in the New Hebrides and incidentally, I may mention, that the Presbyterian vote in the Commonwealth is powerful. These Missions entirely distrust the French administration of natives and they would certainly object most strongly to the French having exclusive control of any part of the Group ... It was thought however that if the League of Nations and the mandatory principle were brought in, they could not very well object to the French taking over some of the islands under the safeguards this imposed.

[I have] considerable doubts as to the French Government agreeing when approached as to the partition of the New Hebrides under mandate.

The Foreign Office was to put the partition proposal before the French government on 24 December 1925, the Australian and New Zealand Governments and the Western Pacific High Commission being informed secretly on 4 December.¹⁹

This, among other things, is evidence of the power held by the Presbyterians in New Hebrides, who formed no part of the Condominium Government and were hated by both French and British settlers who believed them to be the main reason why the Condominium could not work.²⁰

On 5 March Leo Amery wrote secretly to Sir Eyre Hutson about the introduction of Asiatic labour into the New Hebrides for employment by British settlers, a copy of which would go to the Resident Commissioner, Smith-Rewse. He did not consider such a move desirable at the present moment. Whatever the outcome of the partition proposal, it was not to be assumed that he contemplated 'any departure from the attitude taken by my predecessor as expressed 24 July 1924.'²¹

Leading up to yet another Imperial Conference to take place in October 1926, the British Foreign Office had approached the French one about partition of New Hebrides under two separate mandates. On 26 April the Head of the French Foreign Office, M. Berthelot, told the British Ambassador that the French Minister for Colonies was 'extremely hostile to any idea of partition and was well content to continue the present Condominium'.

Geoffrey Smith-Rewse, like his predecessor Merton King, maintained good relations with his French partner and had managed to arrange adequate joint control of the Condominium Treasury, had made progress in drawing up a code of Native Laws and made better provision for Indigenous medical requirements. But the Joint Court was still not working, as the French insisted it could not function without a Public Prosecutor and a Registrar, both of whom must be neutral by the terms of the Agreement of 1906.

A year earlier, on 11 May 1925, the Secretary of State, Colonial Office—having waited for a favourable moment to raise the New Hebrides question—had asked the Governors-General of Australia and New Zealand opinion on partition. Both countries had just had a change of ministries.

On partition, he raised two points: (a) each share should consist of islands contiguous with each other for administrative purposes; and (b) each island should go to that Power which had preponderance in commercial and missionary interests and in number of subjects.

Britain felt justified in asking for Tanna, Erromanga, Aneityum, Aniwa, Futuna and the Banks and Torres Groups. There were immediate difficulties. This would leave England with no good harbour in the Group and France would not agree to give up any of the important islands, Santo, Malekula or Efate:

Using the contiguity principle it might be possible to ask France to give up Efate and keep the rest but this is very unlikely, due to the great preponderance of French settlers.

Regarding territorial compensation to England in the case of France taking over the Group, the Admiralty considering islands in French Polynesia thought that Rapa Iti in was not suitable because of poor anchorage and isolated position, and that Bora Bora was preferable to Mangareva.

On 19 May 1925 New Zealand decided to leave the question on partition to Britain 'without the necessity of first consulting the Government of this country'. Australia was not quite so accommodating. Australian interests must not be overlooked. Australian shipping (meaning Burns Philp and Company) must not be 'squeezed' from the Group and the rights of the New Hebrides Mission must be safeguarded. Australia's response was delivered on 17 October 1925.

Concerning population, missionary and commercial interests as criteria in the partitioning of New Hebrides, Australia disagreed with taking them into account because these criteria would favour France. Australia also wanted Britain to have Efate despite the fact that most of the population there was French.

The Australian 'trump card' was the following:

It will doubtless be remembered by H.M.'s Government that in 1902 the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia acquired a beneficial interest in approximately 100,000 acres of land in the New Hebrides of which the trustees were Messrs Burns Philp and Company.

As if the British government could forget.

Some of this land had been inherited from the Australian New Hebrides Company, the precursor of Burns Philp and Company, and of doubtful title. Most of the settlers who took up grants had failed and left the Group because of sharp practice on the part of Burns Philp and because Australia would not help by giving them rebates on their produce. And when England granted one thousand pounds for poorer settlers in the Group to get their land surveyed, Burns Philp and the New Hebrides Mission used it for their own surveys. This left a very bad taste in the mouth of the British Colonial Office and particularly the Western Pacific High Commission which did not hold Burns Philp in high regard and was angered at being 'used'.

What Australia wanted was for France not to have the Group and for Britain to take all financial responsibility for alleviating the situation of British settlers living there.

As for what the New Hebrides Mission had in mind for the Indigenous people, the treatment of Pacific Island peoples by outsiders was being seriously questioned by anthropologists, but this did not cause any abatement of the vociferous support of its Presbyterian followers in Australia.

Australia's parting shot was that in the event of partition, the Commonwealth Government wanted to have a representative at the table.²²

The Secretary of State, Colonial Office had not bothered to raise with the Governors-General—once again—the idea of buying out the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* as the British Ambassador had found out that the SFNH could not dispose of its land without the consent of the French Government and that the whole control of the activities of the SFNH had been placed in the hands of a new company founded in 1924, the *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

By 17 September 1926 the Colonial Office asked the Foreign Office whether in view of the extremely hostile attitude of the French Minister for Colonies to any idea of partition, anything was to be gained by telling the French our ideas for dividing the Group.²³ The Admiralty also had an interest in the outcome. The Foreign Office preferred that the matter be left to them to negotiate.

As regards Chinese labour, a member of the Colonial Office noted

... from the point of view of our interests in the Far East, I would deprecate any proposal for indentured Chinese labour. Any labour introduced from China ought to be 'free'. Otherwise we shall be accused in Chinese propaganda of the anti-British type, of treating the Chinese as an inferior race.

While the Admiralty 'had no observations to offer ... except that we have no idea what "special procedure" can be adopted to make the French give way'.

Leading up to the Imperial Conference, due to start on 28 October, the French had not been asked for a written expression of their views on the matters raised, but the Colonial Office was aware of a new policy developed by the French government since the 1923 Imperial Conference which included

... the introduction of Indo-Chinese labourers... Approximately 3000 of these labourers have ... been imported...

... the formation of October 1924 of a French Company to lease and exploit the lands of the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

According to information received by the British, the French government had two seats on the Boards of this company; the Government of French Indo-China had taken shares in it to the value of 1,000,000 francs; the Bank of Indo-China was involved; while *la Société—Le Nickel* (Rothschilds), the *Banque de l'Union Parisienne* and others are participating.

There were other points referred to about French developments but the one just given is the most important for the purposes of the Kerr Brothers story: the formation of the new French Company—*Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles Hébrides*—with its strong support from the French Ministry for Colonies.

By 1926 the *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles Hébrides* had proved to be very financially successful and similar companies were envisaged. It was no wonder that the French Ministry was hostile to the idea of partition under Mandate or otherwise, was playing for time, and was obstructing British efforts to get the Lands Claim work of the Joint Court underway. None of the real estate the *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles Hébrides* was dealing with had yet passed through the Court and much of it was of doubtful title in any case.

The Australian and New Zealand members of the New Hebrides Committee of the Imperial Conference were J.G. Coates and S.M. Bruce, Prime Ministers of New Zealand and Australia respectively. They met with the Secretary of State Colonial Office and a representative of the Foreign Office on 26

October. Amery opened the meeting by saying that the French were unwilling to discuss partition. The French Foreign Minister had said that, if they did, the French would claim the best islands.

Bruce feared that

... we should be forced to consider the desperate remedy of taking all steps to put British settlers on equal terms with their French rivals.

Like Bruce, Coates thought the French view would have to be got in writing but if all else failed he agreed with Bruce that British settlers would have to be put on the same footing as French ones.

After some discussion, it was agreed that if France did accept partition of the Group, Britain would ask for all the southern islands, the Torres and Banks Groups as well as the Eastern Pacific harbour of Bora Bora. The French could have all the central islands and Efate. If this failed, British settlers would have to be given economic support to enable them to compete on equal terms with French settlers even if it meant introduction of Asiatic labour. Coates had no objections to such introduction. It was being successfully used on Nauru, Ocean Island and Samoa.

What troubled Amery was the expense that might be incurred 'since owing to the inability of British settlers to harvest their crops, they are not at present in a position to finance the introduction of labour'. He wanted to know whether the Commonwealth would be prepared to help finance them. Bruce was prepared to look into the matter.

In the meantime the British Resident Commissioner, Smith-Rewse, was to avoid making any statement to the New Hebrides British Association that the question of labour was under consideration but to 'invite expression of view as to measures possible to afford relief other than the introduction of Asiatics'.²⁴ The New Hebrides British Association had, it seems, also raised the troubling question of legal assistance, when the Joint Court began to consider land claims.²⁵

Lord Crewe, the British Ambassador, put the question of partition to the French President Raymond Poincaré on 12 November. The answer came back:

... that careful study ... has led the French Government to the very definite conclusion that a premature partition would very gravely compromise the development of the Group. New groupings have recently been formed in France for the development of the New Hebrides and heavy financial responsibilities have been undertaken. A change in the government of the Group would have a discouraging effect on these undertakings.

The French Government would be glad to examine any improvements which may appear necessary in the experience of the last 12 years.²⁶

Leo Amery, after the French refusal to agree to partition, had a conference on 24 November with Prime Ministers Bruce and Coates and it was decided that representatives of Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand would set up a Commission to investigate the situation under the following headings: (1) the situation of British settlers versus the French; (2) provision of adequate labour; (3) measures to assist British settlers to produce and market their produce and to indicate what financial assistance, would be required from the Government whether by loan or otherwise to carry into effect any recommendations the Commission may make.

In the event of it being decided to introduce Asiatic labour, Amery was prepared to look at it favourably but would have to get the concurrence of the Government that they would provide financial assistance. He warned Sir Eyre Hutson that it largely depended on the conclusions reached by Australia and New Zealand.

One definite decision that came out of the second meeting of the New Hebrides Committee on 22 November was to take

... special measures to persuade the French government to agree without further delay to the resumption of all land registration work by the New Hebrides Joint Court.

Bruce and Coates would have to go back to their respective Cabinets but the current New Hebrides Committee of the 1926 Imperial Conference was of the opinion that the decision reached should not

be published in the country for the time being. Nevertheless, there would be no objection to 'informing the British settlers of the appointment of a Commission and its terms of reference'.²⁷

Was this because Amery was wary of what Exeter Hall²⁸ would come up with if it was agreed to allow Asiatic labour for British subjects? It was revealed that the New Hebrides Mission was not the sticking point on this matter in this case. To hold out a straw to British subjects in New Hebrides that at least something was being considered would be a good thing.

On 23 November Stanley Bruce, who was not returning directly to Australia, sent a telegram to Earle Page, Acting Prime Minister in his absence, telling him of the French refusal to agree to partition and the proposal to introduce free contract labour from Asia and elsewhere, subject to similar conditions in use in Western Samoa. He also told him of the proposed Commission of enquiry that was to comprise members from the Western Pacific High Commission, Australia and New Zealand.

A reply was urgently required and Coates of New Zealand put forward the name of General Richardson, Administrator of Western Samoa, as its representative. He was strongly convinced that

... the moral effect of the [proposed] Committee *vis-à-vis* the French [would] be reduced unless action follow[ed] closely after the Imperial Conference.

Australia was not so forthcoming. On 16 December Bruce told Amery that 'his colleagues were nervous on the subject of Chinese labour'. If the Australian Cabinet agreed, his deputy was to arrange for an Australian representative for the proposed commission to go to Vila. Bruce was due to return to Australia via the United States of America on 22 December and hoped to have a definite reply from his Government before then.

The White Australia Policy was behind the 'nerves' exhibited by the Australian Cabinet. They did not want Chinese, Javanese, Indian or any other non-white 'invasion' of the New Hebrides, despite the fact it was 1700 miles out in the Pacific Ocean with New Caledonia in between and not an island group lying just off-shore. The possibility that Australia also would have to face certain financial costs did not help.

The proposed commission was further delayed in commencing its work in Vila by mid-January 1927 as the Colonial Office had wanted. The Duke of York was to visit Fiji then and Britain's representative, the Western Pacific High Commissioner Sir Eyre Hutson, could not very well be absent from Suva at such a time.

Sadly, with all this delay, the risk of British plantations being transferred to French control was increased. If a definite date for the setting up of the Commission had been announced it would have encouraged British settlers to hold on.

With 32 years of close connection with the New Hebrides behind him Graham Kerr no longer believed that the unique position of the British planter in New Hebrides would ever be given sympathetic consideration by British authorities. He was in Paris about to negotiate the sale of two important plantations. These plantations had been mentioned several times in official reports as being at risk. As far as Graham Kerr was concerned it was now too late.

On 29 December 1926, accompanied by Emile My, Graham Kerr was interviewed in Paris by Charles Revel, Director of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, the real-estate company cited by the very hostile French Minister for Colonies as being the main reason France would not agree to partition of the New Hebrides. Unaware of the adverse official skirmishes between Britain and France and the developing British position, Graham Kerr, as a British subject, was in a very delicate and dangerous situation. This he did not realise.

The money-oriented directors of the real-estate *Compagnie Française* were astute stock-brokers under the control of the French Government. They had no interest in the agricultural development of the properties they were hoping to take over, only the profits they could make by undercutting bids and resale at a price to suit themselves. The shareholders, who put agricultural development first in order to increase the value of their shares, were of no importance. This too, Graham Kerr did not know.

Endnotes

- 1 Dr. Herriott took up the duties of Superintendent of the Paton Memorial Hospital on Iririki when Dr. E. McKenzie left on 6 August 1925.
- 2 E.G. Seago's application to be Assistant Resident Commissioner had recently been turned down, ostensibly because of age—he was ten years younger than George Joy, a Colonial Office man and new to the region who was given the post. Seago, supported by Merton King and Smith Rewse, was the obvious choice having acted in that position several times before. I feel that the real reason was that he was not a Colonial Office man who, just like his uncle Captain Rason the first Resident Commissioner and not reappointed, had belonged to the Royal Navy. The Colonial Office through the Western Pacific High Commission wanted complete control. Seago had tried to get promotion elsewhere. After a visit to London to see doctors about his poor state of health, he was coming back to the New Hebrides with the Condominium positions of District Agent for Efate and Commandant of British Constabulary. On 2 June 1925 the Sec of State C.O. had announced that he had been awarded the M.B.E. which he later 'accepted with pleasure'. Smith Rewse told Hutson 26 July 1926 that 'the decoration was presented to Mr Seago at the British Residency at a meeting of all British Residents who were in Vila at the time'. See WPHC 2827/1926.
- 3 Thomas Johnston, a friend of the Kerrs dating back to Captain Macleod's days, had been appointed British Vice-Consul in 1922. On 12 March 1925 he was recognised a H.M.'s British Consul by M. D'Arboussier, Acting Governor of New Caledonia since the departure of Jules Repiquet. See Reel G 21256. Corres. of H.B.M. Consuls Noumea, 1875–1963.
- 4 Capt C. Leonard Barrett, Cmdr. R.N. Reserve had been appointed to command *Euphrosyne* in December 1911.
- 5 All correspondence regarding the sale of Hog Harbour is held by the author and is in her archives. Archive Boxes 5, 15, esp. 16 and 23.
- 6 See White Envelope No. 3, Cote A 1926. *Pourparlers avec CFINH filiale de le SFNH. Premiers contr les expertise Laubreaux* (sic), Vigoureux to Kerr Bros, 30 July 1926.
- 7 See White Envelope No. 12. Option and Sale of Mate Wulu. Letters Julius Petersen to Kerr Bros, 3 Aug 1926.
- 8 'The interests in France' would turn out to be the problem. The Director of CFINH in Paris was Charles Aupied, a stockbroker from Bordeaux. His sole interest was buying and selling real estate, not developing it—and making for himself a handsome profit at the same time. Aupied was also Director of SFNH. My father would not get a real run-down of his activities until 1937, far too late in the day.
- 9 See White Envelope No. 12, Option and sale of Mate Wulu, G.L.S. Kerr to Petersen 12 Aug 1926.
- 10 See White Envelope No. 12, Option and sale of Mate Wulu, for this document.
- 11 See White Envelope No. 3, Cote A.1926 for this letter. What my father did not know at this stage was that both Vigoureux and Lambreaux were in league with the 'Paris interests'. CFINH was a subsidiary of the SFNH.
- 12 WPHC 576/1925.
- 13 And no doubt for the hospitality of his wife, Muriel Kerr (ed.)
- 14 For letters Lambreaux to G.L.S. Kerr, 5 Oct 1926 and Kerr Bros to Vigoureux 21 Oct. See White Envelope No. 3, Cote A 1926.
- 15 See White Envelope No. 5, Properties Under Offer. Both Barclay and Wells cancelled their options on 28 Feb 1927. Barclay later in 1927 told Graham Kerr 'Regarding your option to buy Sassuli from me I was side-tracked by frenzied wireless messages from Malo, mostly from J. Hawkesby although I thought it was Matt Wells. This led to my asking you for release, quite unnecessarily. I sold to Renault not making a good price'. In a letter dated 11 May 1927, Louis Vautier of Kerr Bros. Sydney office wrote to my father in Paris telling him that Commandant Renault, now Director of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* with its HQ at Rue Scribe Paris, (also the HQ of SFNH), had bought huge properties in New Hebrides for his company. What actually happened was a deliberate undermining of certain people who had given first option to Kerr Bros. All this directed from Paris.
- 16 See White Envelope No. 5, Properties Under Offer.
- 17 See White Envelope No. 5, Thomas Property.
- 18 PRO Reel 4342, C.O. 537/967.
- 19 C.O. 537/967 New Hebrides, Secret. No. 2586, 2 Feb 1926, Future of the New Hebrides.
- 20 Neither British nor French settlers favoured Condominium government but, if that is what they were stuck with, they would get on with each other and they did. What the New Hebrides Mission had in mind for the Islanders was a Western life-style completely alien to their own, which the Mission would control.
- 21 C.O. 537/967, W. Pacific. New Hebrides, Secret, No. 2586. 2 Feb 1926. Future of the New Hebrides.
- 22 C.O. 537/969, W. Pacific. New Hebrides, No 9039, 24 April 1926, Secret, Imperial Conference, 1926.
- 23 C.O. 537/971, W. Pacific. New Hebrides, C17743, [Secret]. Proposed Partition of the New Hebrides. For Xerox of pp. 11-14 see G.B. C.O. Reports Envelope.
- 24 C.O. 537/973, W. Pacific. New Hebrides No. C20955. The New Hebrides Committee, 1st Meeting, 26 Oct 1926, p. 21.

- 25 C.O. 537/973, New Hebrides Committee, 1st Meeting, 26 Oct 1926. See previous endnote.
- 26 C.O. 537/976, No 20958, New Hebrides Committee, Papers subsequent to first meeting.
- 27 C.O. 537/977, W. Pacific. New Hebrides, C21902, 26 Nov 1926. See also C.O. 537/978. W. Pacific, New Hebrides, C21903. Future policy in the New Hebrides, 24 Nov 1926. Another report relevant to the subject is C.O. 537/981, W. Pacific. New Hebrides. C22745, 10 Dec 1926, New Hebrides Committee, Concurrences and Conclusions of Second Meeting of Committee, (Imperial Conference 1926).
- 28 As Katherine Cawsey says in her introduction to Kerr Brothers Book 1, 'Exeter Hall in London was the well-publicised platform of such bodies as the Aborigines Protection Society and was the mouthpiece of the New Hebrides Mission. To Exeter Hall the South Pacific came to be regarded as a hide-out for disreputable villains evading the law.'



Chapter 9 1927: The Commission that Came Too Late

On 11 January Graham Kerr accompanied by Emile My agreed to give Charles Revel, acting for *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, a three month option to buy Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations for 125,000 pounds sterling.¹

In a letter dated 17 January this was confirmed by Graham Kerr ‘specifying expressly that the Group holding the option, must, in case the option is taken up, settle all claims which might eventually be raised by a third party on these properties’. It needs to be realised that all land claims in the New Hebrides had to be ratified by the Joint Court of the Condominium which having been closed since 1916 was finally getting down to work. Titles to both Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations were contested by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which was represented by *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*. As the potential buyer, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was also French that would not cause insuperable difficulties.²

Charles Revel was to nominate the persons taking up the option by 1 February, Graham Kerr consenting to a delay of three months expiring on 30 April. Enclosed was an annex of the contents both fixed and otherwise at Turtle Bay and Vila with the proviso regarding tree counts for both coconut and cacao trees that they were only approximate. The separate annex for Mate Wulu stated specifically that tree numbers were not guaranteed. Both points are of great importance. The option period was granted for the prospective buyers to check for themselves what they proposed to buy.³

I cannot stress too far the importance of the ‘Special Condition’ attached to the option which committed the buyers to ‘take all the properties at present ceded in the state they are found on entering into possession’.⁴ This clause does not appear in French versions of the option, which Emile My translated from the English for Graham Kerr, realising its importance (sic). I believe this clause was not included so as to make Aupied’s tree count inventory, which D.H. Kerr refused to sign, evidence of the dishonest dealings of the Kerr Brothers.

The repercussions for the future lives of the Kerr brothers and sisters and their families—up to the time Graham Kerr died in 1960—stemming from deliberate misunderstandings and misrepresentations by the French companies (especially the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*) about the sale of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu are key to the tragedy that underlies the story I am telling, as you will see.

Kerr and My attended a meeting on 20 January in the presence of Revel and others at Charles Aupied’s office at Rue Scribe, headquarters of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, where various buildings were marked out by Kerr on the Turtle Bay chart. After further discussion Kerr found that ‘The matter hinges to a certain extent on our retaining sufficient interest in the concern to give confidence to investors’.⁵

Next day, clearly now having doubts—the original idea was to sell outright—Graham Kerr discussed the matter with Emile My and sent a cable to the firm in Sydney to get their ideas. On 26 January Kerr and My called on Revel and met Charles Aupied who, with André Joyer, had been chosen to take up the option. ‘The big question with these men was how many *Parts de Fondateur*—Founder’s Shares—something with which Kerr was not familiar, he would be prepared to take.

He needed to know their real value and My took him to the *Banque Nationale de Credit* for advice. Graham Kerr presented an introduction from the Manager of the Australian Bank of Commerce in Sydney and was well received. Emile My also sought advice from a banker friend.

'The advice we have', wrote Graham Kerr to Kerr Bros. in Sydney, 'is that *Parts de Fondateur* are a very valuable thing in a successful concern and particularly with advance when there has to be increase of capital ... Of course we would have to see that we had the proper proportion ... and not be swamped'.

He and Emile My paid a further visit to the *Banque Nationale de Credit* to discuss what Aupied had offered. By 3 February Kerr asked My to put into French exactly the number of '*Parts*' he 'would be prepared to accept to cover a reduction of 3,500,000F in the agreed price for the properties. Out of 30,000 *Parts* we are asking one fifth'.⁶

On 4 February Aupied told Kerr that Commandant Antoine Audoin in Noumea would be cabled to make an immediate inspection of the properties on offer. Kerr presumed that after the receipt of Audoin's report the group, to which he had given three months option, would be able to say yes or no immediately. In the case of acceptance, four months from 1 February should be sufficient for first payment to be made and inventories of the removable items on the plantations drawn up.

In further discussions Graham Kerr, unlike Revel, indicated he did not regard bushland in the New Hebrides as much value. To him almost the whole land value was in the work done to make a plantation and keep it in proper order. He emphasised that a plantation not worked for even six years was almost of less value than virgin bushland. One of his reasons for selling was that 'he was not as young as he used to be'. He was 54, his brother Hugh Kerr was younger, and his two sisters Agnes and Mary Kerr, who were at present running the firm in Sydney, were older.

As for Santo, Graham Kerr spoke of the great future value of cacao that he had recently sold in New York and London at 80 pounds a ton:

Turtle Bay with the necessary labour can in 10 years prove to be of tremendous value.
Do you think that with the Santo plateau we have, that we would sell at 125,000 pounds
if we had an assured supply of labour?

By 9 February the deed was done.⁷ Graham Kerr accepted a price for the properties of 11,500,000F, or its equivalent in sterling, and 4000 *Parts* and signed the three months option.

Now, with time on his hands before he could know the outcome, he decided to pay his first visit to London and also to Bridge-of-Allan in Scotland where his much-loved mother (Flora Jane née Macleod) was buried. He gave his address for acceptance or rejection as that of his friend Emile My in Paris who would keep in touch with him.⁸ On 15 February from London he wrote to My about putting Thomas's plantation at Hog Harbour on the market 'now we have reached a certain point with the main proposal'.

My learned on 17 February that Aupied and Revel had arranged with the Minister for Colonies to wire the French High Commissioner in Noumea to receive from Audoin all answers to the questionnaire he had in hand. These were to be wired to the Minister in France. Graham Kerr's agents in the New Hebrides were to give Audoin every facility to fulfil his mission. This Graham Kerr had already offered. He understood from Aupied that the French Resident Commissioner at Vila had been asked to send Audoin to Santo on the Government yacht.⁹

Back in London from Scotland on 8 March, Graham Kerr received a telegram from My asking what ordinary shares—*actions*—would he take up in the proposed company based on Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. Two million francs had been provided in the option and Kerr replied he would take up one million five-hundred thousand.

D.H. Kerr in Sydney wrote to his brother in Paris on 9 March that Wallace in Vila was looking into various title deeds for Hog Harbour plantation and told him that he should try and include it in the Turtle Bay deal.¹⁰ He had been told that some other people had taken out an option on Hog Harbour when ours expired. Graham Kerr did not yet know that this person was Commandant Renault who was working for the same people with whom he was dealing and undercutting his prices.¹¹

D.H. Kerr was to go to New Hebrides by *Dupleix* on 18 March. He told his brother:

It is important that a member of the firm be represented at a Commission to be held starting in Vila on 6 April ... Even if the business you are on comes off, it will be as well

for British settlers to be there to give their side of the question. It will show the Commission, who is responsible for the rotten state of affairs prevailing for British settlers. The Missionaries, now they can see the place fast going French, will support the bringing in of foreign labour and, if it comes off, take the credit.¹²

Agnes Kerr, the firm's accountant, added in a postscript: 'It looks as if New Hebrides is going up in price when there is probability of the British getting outside labour too'. This was the main reason the Kerrs had turned to the French. Under present circumstances British bidders for plantations were just not there.

Graham Kerr was back in Paris by 12 March where My told him that the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* had applications for 24 million francs in shares, for 15 million to be issued. He and My then visited the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine*—very big shareholders in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*—about them putting up the money which had to be done before purchase money was payable. They agreed, and Kerr and My then visited Aupied and Joyer and Kerr 'agreed to take 1,250,000 in shares in lieu of 1,500,000 originally asked for'.¹³

The first meeting of the Board of Administration of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* took place on 14 March and Graham Kerr was present. On 19 March he went to Aupied's to meet the President of the new company, M. Merlin, late Governor-General of French Indo-China. And the next day he sent off a cable to Sydney to say the sale was practically definite. Nothing had yet been heard from Audoin about his findings due to be completed by 30 April.

On 15 March Fernand Largeau handed Aupied an independent report required under French law on the option Graham Kerr had given on 9 February. Largeau had been resident in the New Hebrides for almost 30 years during which time he had held the posts of local Director *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, President of *Syndicat Français Agricole* and *Société Coopérative*. This allowed him to follow the affairs of the Kerrs and Julius Petersen and had given him a thorough knowledge of their plantations and their business affairs. He wrote:

Thirty years of personal experience of tropical agriculture allow me to give you an educated evaluation of the subject you have charged me to examine.

He examined the option plus its annexes point by point and concluded that the Board of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was in possession of a magnificent domain which only lacks for labour. He indicated that lack of labour had prevented Messrs Kerr Brothers from complete success. Such as it is, and without taking into consideration future possibilities, the sum of 11,500,000 Francs actual price asked, appeared reasonable to him and the business itself very good. He said that the price asked today appears a little higher than those asked previously, but the increase in value of Hebridean land and the decrease in the purchase power of our [French] money amply justifies this difference.¹⁴

Next day Graham Kerr cabled his Sydney office

... to lodge with the French consul in Sydney properly executed authority for [him] to deal with the properties and to get the Consul to cable the French Minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris when such authority has been lodged with him.

On 21 March he took the Mys and Largeaus out to *dejeuner* to celebrate, before attending the second meeting of the new company, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, which was formally constituted the same day. Members of the Board were: President, M Merlin; Vice President, M. Luc; Directors, Aupied, Girot and Joyer; Kerr, as a large shareholder; Edgar Raoul-Duval, representative of *Maison Raoul-Duval*, Merchants of Le Havre; Charles Revel, in his own name as well as that of M. Gouin; and General de Salins, representing *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*.

On 23 March Graham Kerr was told by Girot that his option had been officially taken up at the price of 11,885,490F, the official conversion rate at the time being 125F to the pound sterling. Kerr was to note that the deed of sale would be signed in the New Hebrides on their behalf by Commandant Audoin.¹⁵

Before D.H. Kerr left for New Hebrides on 18 March he managed through the firm's solicitors, Perkins, Stevenson & Co, to get the required Power of Attorney for Graham Kerr to act for Kerr Brothers and Julius Petersen. It was necessary for a Notary Public to make a declaration for it to hold good in French law.

In Paris on 24 March Graham Kerr, acting for Theo Thomas, offered Hog Harbour Plantation to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* on certain conditions, with the option open until 30 April 1927 and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* to be aware that land claims have yet to be accepted by the Joint Court.¹⁶ He was notified from the Sydney office by his sister, M.I. Kerr, that Mate Wulu had been left to manage itself as Holger Petersen, Julius Petersen's son, was ill and had been sent to Vila and that Dick Hoffman was going down to take charge.

On 31 March Graham Kerr visited *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* headquarters and made the acquaintance of Leon Vibert who was to manage Turtle Bay for the company and discuss requirements. On 11 April in the company of Emile My he again visited the headquarters to find that Audoin's report had at last been received. To his dismay Graham Kerr found 'there is a very great discrepancy between his figures and D.H.'s for the number of coconuts and cacao at Turtle Bay' and Audoin stated that D.H. Kerr had agreed with him.

Something strange had happened because the Sydney office received an unexplained cable from Noumea on 9 April: 'Do not agree with Audoin's figures', signed D.H. Kerr.¹⁷ Hugh Kerr was not supposed to be involved in the count. So what was going on? Graham Kerr could not

... imagine that D.H. would be so far out so [he could] only presume that this man Audoin has deliberately underestimated or else that he wouldn't take the bother to go over the thing properly. Cacao count is easy but coconut count can only be an estimate.

On 12 April, he wrote to the Sydney office saying that this 'report of Audoin's is late in the day in any case, as the business is already done'. Graham Kerr then brought up another unpleasant thought.

Why the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* rushed our affair through was on account of the government being about to pass a law that *Parts de Fondateur* cannot be sold for two years after formation [of a new company]. These people are hand in glove with the Ministers and had warning of what was going on. The law has since been passed.¹⁸

The granting of *Parts de Fondateur* had been made a condition by Kerr to his giving the option in the first place. Seeds of suspicion now spoiled what he had considered to be an honest straight-forward business deal.

On 13 April Kerr Bros in Sydney sent to Audoin to get in touch with D.H. Kerr 'to see if they cannot get in accord with the numbers of coconuts and cacao'.¹⁹ At the same time Graham Kerr was dealing with the Hog Harbour option, too late to be included with that of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu. Theo Thomas had given Graham Kerr first option to buy which expired 1 September 1927.

On 15 April *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* agreed to Kerr's option price for Hog Harbour of 25,000 pounds, the option to remain open until 31 May. Now wary following Audoin's report, Graham Kerr made it a condition 'that they must verify—as far as they wish—numbers, quantities, areas and conditions, before taking up the option and not contest same afterwards'.²⁰ *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* told my father that if they did take it up, they could not afford to pay more than a certain amount down until the end of the year, when they would increase their capital.²¹ 'In that case', Graham Kerr wrote to his Sydney office, 'it would be necessary for us to take over from Thomas on account of our option'.

He was getting in much deeper than originally intended but he made an offer to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* that on the payment of 100,000F—to coincide with the last payment on Kerr/Petersen properties due 20 July—he would extend the option until 31 December. Kerr Bros was

to take over running the Thomas property until that date or such date as *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* made payment. Until then the place would remain unencumbered as Kerr's security.

On 20 April, Agnes Kerr wrote to her brother in Paris that she had heard from D.H. Kerr who was now at Turtle Bay consulting with Audoin.²² It was thought that the latter's figures were 'very much out on account of the production'. The production figures given in Kerr Brothers' option in February were never challenged. If Audoin's figures were right, the production figures would have been much less as they were calculated on the number of coconuts to a tree and the number of trees to a row which, because of the frequent hurricanes, never contained the same number of trees. The coconut count was worse than that of cacao and all figures worse for Mate Wulu which my father had stipulated were not guaranteed anyway.

D.H. Kerr had not been at Turtle Bay when Audoin made his count. W.T. Robertson, always called Robbie, had been in charge and accompanied Audoin round the plantation, enjoying amicable relations with the Frenchman who was given every facility and seemed to be impressed with what he saw.²³ Robbie told the office that he thought Audoin had used an old plan of the plantation from some years back which he had found in the Store and had, like a surveyor, calculated from measurements. Aldington, who was also employed at Turtle Bay, agreed with Robbie.

D.H. Kerr's estimate, given off the top of his head, was higher than those on the option. The actual count was not his concern and he possibly wondered who wanted his figures. The message he received in Vila was garbled and he never knew who sent it. Perhaps, he thought the Paris deal was off and was preoccupied with the forthcoming Commission and how he could present a case that would help British settlers get outside labour.

On 25 May Agnes Kerr, in Sydney, told her brother that D.H. had come up to Sydney to try and find out exactly what was going on.²⁴ He did not think that Audoin would 'deliberately make less count'. She said that they 'are now having a complete count made and we will let you know by cable as soon as we know. Re cacao, D.H. gave the number as planted. Audoin gave that with percentage off for dead one, blanks etc'. She concluded 'D.H. thinks his number might be a bit high. She believed that Audoin said that everyone over-estimated but she hoped that he himself had deduced too many'. This, if Audoin was working from plans made years earlier—as thought to be the case by Robbie and Aldington—could well be the case.

Audoin altered his figures several times but no definite figure was established between the parties. Graham Kerr in Paris was prepared in good faith to come to an amicable settlement if necessary with concessions on both sides. From what happened I feel that Audoin, a retired ship's captain, did not really know how to do the job and D.H. Kerr became unwittingly involved. It was up to Audoin to do the count, and after D.H. Kerr made his mistake, Graham Kerr in Paris told his brother he must do and say no more. D.H.'s part of the contract was to get the new French manager installed, give him advice, and deal with the hand-over of moveable property.

All fixed items like trees were Audoin's business but the latter did not see it that way and complained to headquarters that D.H. Kerr would not cooperate. It was a ploy to show up the Kerrs as slippery customers doing a dishonest deal. In fact, next year on 6 April 1928, Vibert, by now Director of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* for the New Hebrides would, in the French Court in Vila, charge the Kerrs with not being there to sign a formal agreement at the final tree count meeting at Turtle Bay attended by Audoin and the French Deputy Commissioner. Vibert then affirmed that Audoin's and his figures for the trees agreed.

Graham Kerr in Paris notified the Sydney office that the Viberts would leave for Australia on *Céphée* from Marseilles on 4 May 1927. Mr Vautier from the office was to meet them on arrival and an account would be set up with the firm for 2000 pounds for Vibert's use:

Mr Vibert is the Manager for Santo and after he knows the run of things will take over from D.H. He has high recommendations and it is important for us, if he is a good man for the position, as we have considerable interest in the concern.

Graham Kerr's sisters in the Sydney office were 'somewhat mystified about what was going on in Paris' and also about the different sorts of shares. Mary Kerr told Graham in a letter on 4 May that 'it appears that the Commission at Vila last month discussing Labour problems for the British settlers, decided that

it would be necessary to allow outside labour'. It seemed to her that this was coming a bit late in the day, as now Malo was all French with Hawkesby, Barclay, Wells and Shepherd having been sold out.²⁵

On 7 May Graham Kerr received the first payment for the sale of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu—4,500,000F—which transferred into 36,000 pounds sterling was deposited in the Australian Bank of Commerce in London to be sent to Sydney immediately so that Julius Petersen could be paid his share.

The settlement had not been amicable. After receiving Audoin's cable saying that D.H. Kerr had agreed with him, Aupied tried to impose conditions which Graham Kerr refused to accept. He told the Sydney office on 8 June:

This was most unfortunate as we had arranged to settle any doubt by a compromise, they accepting our count, and we allowing them the produce for the place, following the departure of *Dupleix*, from 1 April for our place, and from Petersen's from the date we take over, they paying running expenses.²⁶

After picking up scrip certificates from *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* for 960 ordinary shares as previously arranged, he and Emile My left on 19 June for London to try and find Edward Jacomb. Kerr was now worried at what other 'outrageous claims they may make'. Jacomb, who had earlier been his lawyer in New Hebrides, was now resident in London studying medicine. With law degrees both from Inns of Court, London, and the Sorbonne in Paris as well as being the author of a book²⁷, Jacomb would be able to give him the advice he needed.

Emile My had to return to Paris before Jacomb was tracked down but Graham Kerr met with Jacomb on 26 June. They 'went into the matter of our dispute with *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* re numbers of coconuts and cacao ... he says we are in a very good position having so much of the money and the place too. Only we must keep possession until payments are made'.²⁸ The final payment for Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu was due on 20 July.

On 7 July, when Graham Kerr was thinking of asking *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* to make the payment a few days earlier—to fit in with the departure of *Dupleix* with Vibert on board to take over at Turtle Bay—Jacomb reiterated:

Say nothing as it does not matter to us. It is their look-out if they are late in getting possession of the property ... we are to assume they will carry out their engagements ... The important thing for us is to retain possession until paid as, in case of any dispute, then they must go to the English Court at Vila if they have a claim to make. On the other hand if we had to go for them we should have to go to the French Court.²⁹

Graham Kerr was so angry at the treatment he was getting that he arranged to send a secret counter sign, the word 'Stirling', when he cabled the Sydney office for D.H. Kerr to hand over. After what had been done to D.H. Kerr

... he would not trust some of these jokers to send a cable purporting to come from me.³⁰

Graham Kerr had told the Board of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* he was consulting Jacomb. This would not have been well received, as with Jacomb's knowledge of both British and French law he had conducted many successful cases in defence of Indigenous clients during his long residence in the New Hebrides making himself heartily disliked by French authority.

But this was not the only reason for the unpleasantness Graham Kerr was fighting. Commandant Renault had arrived in Paris after his triumphant plantation-buying spree in the New Hebrides and Kerr now discovered that Renault had undercut the option price of 25,000 pounds which *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* had already accepted from him to buy Hog Harbour plantation. Renault had talked Theo Thomas down to 17,000 pounds. Kerr was disgusted. What else was going on behind his back? On 26 May he told the Sydney office that Thomas had 'messed it up for us by giving the sec-

ond option' and he intended to do everything possible to prevent *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* getting the place through Renault's option.

The place is well worth the 25,000 pounds I asked for it, particularly in connection with Turtle Bay. It would serve Thomas right if he fell in through giving that second option.³¹

At this time the idea was born of the Kerr family taking up the offer at 17,000 pounds for itself, since Kerr Brothers held first option. Emile My suggested he too would like to be a part of it at that price. Perhaps the two of them could set up a British/French company based on Hog Harbour and My's plantation further south at Shark Bay? Graham Kerr was getting in far deeper than he had intended and would have to ask the opinion of the Sydney office.

In a letter from Mary Kerr dated 22 June:

Agnes and I are willing to take shares in it ... D.H. has a good idea of the place; if we could get Robertson [Robbie] to manage it, there is no doubt it would be a good paying concern ... Even to the first day of September 1927, if we give notice and pay 2% of purchase money to Thomas's solicitors here in Sydney, it will be ours.³²

She also announced the arrival of the Viberts on 20 June accompanied by a book-keeper called Gooding who looked just like Rudolph Valentino. Accommodation had been arranged for their 18-day stay in Sydney. The Viberts made a favourable impression. 'He does not speak many English words yet' but his young daughter had some English and said she was going to teach her mother. Whatever happened, as a result of the Audoin accusation, the office intended to do its best for them.

Louis Vautier from the office was looking after them. She mentioned the huge amount of goods they were taking to Turtle Bay, including a motor car which Vibert had intended to get unloaded in Sydney to go kangaroo shooting until he was dissuaded. He had also brought two greyhounds which had to go into quarantine, not to mention 50 cases of galvanised iron and other items. On 29 July Vautier elaborated further:

Mr Vibert brought a touring car with him and I asked him what he going to do with it. He said even if there was very little to do at present it was his intention to make a road from Petersen's to Thomas's as soon as possible. [He] is now under the impression that Thomas's place will be or is being bought for his Company.

Vibert also believed that there were about 160 labourers at Turtle Bay whereas the office thought there were only 100 to 120 'as it seems as if as many would have to be going home as were being recruited'.

Lunawanna from Turtle Bay and *Olga* from Mate Wulu were about to be purchased by *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* to bring Indo-Chinese labour from Noumea to work the plantations. That would happen when Graham Kerr in Paris sent the special signal to Sydney that the hand-over of these and other items by D.H.—now in Vila—could go ahead.

The Sydney office was experiencing great trouble getting radio messages to D.H. Kerr. Mary Kerr told Graham in Paris that

Noumea is blamed for it and we even wonder now if Noumea is paid to do it, so remarkable are they made to appear ... In order to avoid them passing through Noumea we have been sending by Pacific cable; that is cable to Fiji, and radio from there to Vila.

Vibert might have some wild-cat schemes in mind they thought, but he was very understanding and would learn. At the same time they were worried about what mischief Audoin would make with him when they met. Vibert had told Vautier that 'no one in Paris believed Mr Audoin's story of the trees'.

What was going on? The business deal entered into by the firm in all good faith was proving anything but straightforward. Graham Kerr had told them that 'this is not an ordinary everyday transaction' and he was not wrong. They hoped that the order to hand over would have arrived from him by the time the Viberts 'with their tons of luggage' reached Turtle Bay.

On 12 July Kerr was notified by the Manager of *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* in Paris that a further payment of 5,943,703 francs 125 (sic) would be paid to Kerr Brothers account no later than 21 July, probably earlier. This took place after a very unfriendly meeting 'nearly a rupture of negotiations' as Graham Kerr called it, after he refused to give in to their demands.

Fearful of what still might happen, he notified the Bank:

On receipt please immediately transfer the total amount to our credit at the Australian Bank of Commerce, Threadneedle St. London. At the same time *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* makes this payment, they are also to hand you 4000 *Parts de Fondateur* on our account, which you will please put with those you hold for us.

These were the 960 ordinary shares he had taken out.

The final payment was paid on 15 July and Graham Kerr arranged for 44,000 pounds of it go to Sydney. Instructions now went to the Sydney office to hand over legal possession to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise's* representative at Turtle Bay. An inventory of moveables was to be immediately drawn up as per agreement of 9 February, and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was to be offered all facilities. D.H. Kerr was to make sure that the cutter and punt were not included in the sale items, nor was Pilotin Island as specified in the original option.

Graham Kerr no longer trusted the head men at *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* very far, meaning he did not trust Charles Aupied, the Director. Nevertheless he thought everything would now go smoothly. These people on the Board

... are responsible for a too glowing account of things when putting the thing before shareholders ... there was no occasion to misrepresent things.

He intended to see Jacomb again if the final payment had not been made. To know the deal was through was a great relief. As Mary Kerr wrote 'one never liked to feel sure that all would go right until it was at the present stage'. Now Louis Vautier would go to New Hebrides to help with the hand over. He would deal with the very valuable Vila properties, with Albert Jocteur to help him.

After paying Julius Petersen for Mate Wulu, that plantation was formally taken over for transfer to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* on 25 July.³³ A letter from Mary Kerr on 27 July said that Vautier had left on 22 July. They had received several messages from D.H. Kerr:

He seems to be getting along with handing over very well but will have to arrange about Thomas's now.

This was the taking over of Hog Harbour plantation, which Vibert thought now belonged to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. A young bookkeeper named K. MacManamy had been engaged to manage the store at Hog Harbour for the Kerrs. The sale of Hog Harbour had not yet gone through but Emile My had already advanced 2,500 pounds towards the joint takeover.

Graham Kerr wrote the 'place will be in our name but it is intended unless [it] be sold, to put it under the French flag.³⁴ Until it is either sold or put under French management it will be entirely under our management and right to sell remains with us'. This was something that was not envisaged when he went to Paris to sell all Kerr properties in the New Hebrides, nor had he intended to retain financial interest in Turtle Bay. But that is how it turned out.

Before he left for Sydney on *Commissaire Ramel* on 17 August Graham Kerr went with Emile My to the bank in Paris to give him some shares so he could represent Kerr Bros. Ltd at meetings of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. And, before leaving Paris, he and My were invited on 11 August to

dejeuner at André Joyer's place where he met Commandant and Mrs Renault. Graham Kerr's relations with Joyer, co-Director with Charles Aupied of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, were always good and the meeting was friendly.

But even before he reached Australia further problems had arisen. On 14 September Agnes Kerr wrote and told him that Hugh Kerr had arrived back in Sydney. Vibert said he did not want him to stay on. Vibert then fell out with Robbie who also refused to stay. Vibert then asked Hugh to remain but Hugh said it was no use.

She concluded:

Afraid there will be a mess made of the plantation as Vibert does not seem to have any idea at all of running things and will not let anyone else have any say. Robertson was quite satisfied to carry on at first ... Vibert would take all Chinese labour off cacao-picking to run pigs in the bush for him to shoot etc.

On 17 August Mary Kerr wrote

Hugh seems to be busy taking over at Thomas's Hog Harbour Plantation as far as we know. Vila is the bother. There is no one yet to take it over.³⁵

Audoin, who was responsible, had accompanied Vibert to Turtle Bay where D.H. Kerr was waiting for them:

Audoin began giving D.H. orders wholesale. D.H. told him he did not take orders ... except from his brother G.L.S. Kerr, and to write to his own company in Paris. Audoin stuck close to Vibert all the time. He is nothing but a mischief maker.

As for Vibert Agnes Kerr thought he might have wildcat schemes but he was 'a nice sort of a person'.

On 1 September after certain problems were settled with Theo Thomas about some land leased to him from Burns Philp, the option was taken up for Kerr Brothers to buy the island of Sakau, situated a quarter of a mile from the mainland, 12 miles from Hog Harbour and about three miles from Pt. Olry; to keep Hog Harbour plantation and; to buy about 3000 acres of first class land opposite Sakau and extending to within five miles of Port Olry. Purchase price 17,000 pounds. The Kerrs' lawyers in Sydney, Perkins, Stevenson & Co, and Frank Wallace their lawyer in Vila were dealing with the legal aspect of the sale.

Further information about the hand-over of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* came from a letter from Mary Kerr dated 14 September.³⁶ Much to her relief Louis Vautier was back in the office to help Agnes and herself.

A fairly large shipment of goods was being sent to Turtle Bay and more to Vila to the erstwhile Kerr Brothers Store:

Mr Vibert was sure they would not be doing any business with Sydney but he soon found otherwise. Mr Gooding, the book keeper, took over the Vila store of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. He is very good to deal with they say. Mr Jocteur is being kept on with him and he will be in charge there, as Mr Gooding will be going on to Turtle Bay.

Graham Kerr lost no time getting back on the job when he arrived in Sydney on 27 September. He found that Hugh had not yet taken over Hog Harbour because of 'a nice little hitch with some papers', now fixed, and that Hugh was leaving Sydney by *Makambo* on 30 September to do so.

As a member of the Board of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* Graham Kerr thought it his duty to cable Paris headquarters that Vibert was not doing well. He also wrote to Edward Jacomb to thank him for his great help. The firm of Kerr Brothers and he, personally 'fully appreciate what you

did'. He also told him of the untimely death of Smith-Rewse, the British Resident at Vila, as the result of an accident on 24 August. 'He was well liked both by British and French.'

Graham Kerr had discussed the Turtle Bay problem with his brother D.H. Kerr, and on 11 October, still in his capacity of Board Member, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, he expanded further to his friend and partner in Paris, Emile My, telling him that he was also writing to the Board.³⁷ He had earlier been so worried at the course of events that he had consulted My about getting rid of his shares in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* but had then reconsidered:

Mr Vibert will probably make a good manager when he gains experience but at present things are not at all satisfactory ... We were quite willing to continue the management just as long as the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* wished but it was impossible for my brother to take orders from Vibert. You would think Vibert would be very content to pick up knowledge. Robertson in the first place was quite willing to stay but Vibert make it impossible. [He] did not know the difference between a cacao tree and a vanilla vine. That was alright, but he should be willing to learn. A manager in the islands needs to drop the idea of kid gloves and spats and give a hand as well as direct.³⁸

Graham Kerr then suggested that all the French companies formed on Santo, Malo, Malekula, and Efate should be amalgamated. This would lead to efficiency and save administrative expenses. It was impossible to administer these from Paris and three local administrators would be better.

On 17 October Graham Kerr received a letter from Captain Barclay congratulating him on what 'as far as I hear [has been] a very successful business trip'. Regarding his sale of Sassuli plantation on Malo, Jo Hawkesby had wired him not to sell—he had thought it was Matt Wells.³⁹ 'This led to my asking you for release quite unnecessarily. I sold to Renault ... not making a good price'.⁴⁰

Graham Kerr thought he had better visit the Group and left on 21 October for Noumea on *Dupleix*. At Vila he visited Albert Jocteur at the old Kerr Brothers Store—now *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*'s Vila headquarters—before continuing on. At Nelson Bay, Epi, D.H. Kerr and Theo Thomas boarded the vessel and Thomas gave him some documents that completed the purchase of Hog Harbour. When the ship reached Norsup, Malekula, Graham Kerr remarked on the French *Compagnie Cotonnière* that 'Since I was last here Caillard has made great progress. [He] deserves great credit'. This company had the good fortune to be managed locally.

When *Dupleix* reached Turtle Bay on 5 November Graham Kerr went ashore and found things in very bad order. 'This Vibert sent out from Paris is an awful failure.' He did not have a good word to say for the captain of *Dupleix* either. He 'stupidly' tried to load and unload cargo for Turtle Bay at low water, instead of going first to Mate Wulu. The captain later tried to anchor in 'tremendously deep water' off Robert Petersen Stuart's at Aisse Island. He too was a 'disaster'.

Back in Vila on 12 November Graham Kerr received a radio that the payment for the Thomas property had been arranged for 11 November. He now had some time for socialising with his many friends there. Tennis at Seagoe's and sleeping in a hammock at the new house of his friend W. Lockhart Bell, now British Collector of Customs, 'much cooler than on the water front' at Hotel Moderne.

And there was the latest development in the on-going saga of Annie Petersen's Vysuck Estate, in dispute since 1904 and still not settled.

On 19 November Audoin, back in Noumea, wrote to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in Paris dealing at length with the necessity of improving shipping for all French settlers in the New Hebrides, including expensive lighters and floating platforms for loading and unloading cargo. He suggested a monthly trip via Panama to France with two inter-island smaller vessels to collect from outlying ports and off-load to the larger vessel.

He also suggested that the previous owners of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu, determined to get rid of their plantations at a high price, had confined themselves to crop production only, 'abstaining system-

atically from all serious maintenance.⁴¹ And this was not all. He announced that the Kerrs had taken up Thomas's option for Hog Harbour. He had

...heard it said that they did it at the request of the British Government to reconstitute in the New Hebrides a territory equivalent to that which you [*Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*] have bought from them.

This is so wrong that it would be funny if it were not very serious in its implications. To the Kerrs' other perceived-failings, could now be added that Kerr Brothers Ltd were hand-in-glove with France's not well-liked Condominium partner, Great Britain, which did as little for her own nationals as she could get away with in order to keep the French on side as much as possible. In other words, he was saying that Kerr Brothers had messed up French plans to take over the New Hebrides.

At this time French authorities were also worried about the new British Commission that had been created following the Imperial Conference of 1926. At this time the Commission was received with great fanfare. Would the Commission ruin the plans of the French Minister for Colonies?

As I noted earlier, Graham Kerr's opinion, arrived at from the experience of running Turtle Bay since 1904 with insufficient labour, was that crop production was the only thing that made a plantation a viable proposition. Also the ships that loaded and unloaded cargo had always provided their own barges. If proper attention was paid to high and low tides, the job was easily and quickly carried out. His views are at variance with those of Audoin and Vibert. Neither man had personal experience to back their claims, although Audoin's ideas about *Messageries Maritimes* providing a large vessel to take produce picked up by smaller ones directly to France via Panama was a good one.

On 28 November Graham Kerr rode in the company of Leconte to Téoouma to see what another of the recently-formed French Companies the *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* (CCV) was doing.

A letter from Emile My on 4 December announced that shares in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* had already been quoted on the Paris Stock Exchange, some selling outside for 800F, but Parts had not yet been quoted. This was probably in answer to Graham Kerr's suggestion that he would sell his. He also referred to the expensive lightering service for loading and unloading cargo proposed by Vibert which would include use of plantation labour. Kerr thought the labour would be better employed growing cacao.

My told Graham Kerr that M. de la Vaissière the French Resident Commissioner had been asked his opinion. He shared Kerr's opinion and agreed entirely with him regarding Vibert's big mistake in not listening to or following advice from people much more experienced than him. Emile My who knew the Hebrides from long personal experience thought that the French Resident would listen to Graham Kerr and profit from his views.

On 14 December, Graham Kerr told My that D.H. Kerr had taken over Hog Harbour.⁴² Regarding the 96-year leasehold to Burns Philp and Company with 76 more years to run and not to be sold to a foreign power, they were hopeful of being able to buy it from Burns Philp at a reasonable price. Sakau Island also could not be sold without the permission of its Indigenous inhabitants of whom there was only one remaining. Graham Kerr told My that Thomas had not kept appliances up-to-date and that he was sending a motor truck to Hog Harbour immediately. Much of the labour was now time-expired. Thomas's recruiting vessel *Skandia* did fairly well in November recruiting other labour. He enclosed reports from Robbie now installed there as manager. *Skandia* was to have a new engine which was to be installed in January 1928 in Vila by Fricotte. The urgent requirement at Hog Harbour was a new smoke-house or copra-drying plant, rather a big outlay. My, as a partner in the venture, needed to know the situation.

It must have been suggested to My in Paris that the Kerrs had used pressure to get Robbie to leave Turtle Bay which Graham Kerr, in another letter written on the same date, denied.

There was absolutely no influence from us in regard to his leaving Turtle Bay. He had been quite willing to stay on with *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* until he was messed around by Vibert. In fact Vibert seems to have set out to make it impossible for him to stay. The *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* must not forget that we have a

very big interest in Turtle Bay still and it was not to our interest to take Robertson away. Under Vibert's administration we see nothing but failure ... What he is doing is becoming the laughing stock of the Group. If this sort of administration continues we must take serious steps to clear our holding in actions and parts. We are hoping however that the *Conseil* [Board of Administration] in Paris will try and bring about an amalgamation of the several companies on practical lines with a Board in the Group to do away with these wild plungings of managers without experience.

He could not understand *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* giving free hand to a man like Vibert 'absolutely without experience of this class of work' and he pointed out the good work Caillard, who knew his job, was doing at *Compagnie Cotonnière* on Malekula. Taponier of *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* also looked promising. Vibert was the problem.

He said: 'It is freely predicted in the Group that there will be some cheap properties to pick up later on'. Regarding buying things of no immediate use, he instanced the galvanised iron Vibert had brought with him, now used to dry cacao. 'There is a Gordon Dryer and Drying Platform for cacao'. But Vibert knew best. 'The cacao is put out to dry [on the galvanised iron] without being fermented—the iron spoiling the cacao, and the cacao acid spoiling the iron'.

Graham Kerr told My that he was sending a full report to Aupied in Paris in the coming week, telling him that it was impossible for Santo to run the valuable properties they had bought from Kerrs in Vila and suggesting that they should be handed over to *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté*. He concluded:

If Vibert is kept on however we must hold ourselves free to dispose of *actions* and *parts* the best way we can ... As for the privilege of taking out more shares ... we would not take any more ... while the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* have local management like that of Vibert.

On 20 December he wrote to *Conseil Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in Paris to tell them the ideas he had come up with following his recent visit to the New Hebrides.⁴³ He did not pull any punches. The multiplicity of directors of the various new companies resulted in great waste of money. With regard to Santo, he could not understand why the Board had given a job with a large sum of money to expend, to a man like Vibert:

Surely you could choose a man of experience like Largeau, for one or two years to organise a smooth running property.

He did not think Largeau would remain for more than a year because of health problems, but 'his experience for one year would be beyond price'. Under the present direction he 'saw nothing but failure. Vibert will not take notice of the experience of other people and launches into unnecessary expense'. Here he mentioned

... the expensive procedures Vibert was setting up at Turtle Bay for loading and unloading cargo, including building a wharf which has no practical use and which idea we abandoned years ago.

In 1925, he had said 'we loaded at Turtle Bay 66 tons of copra and received 40 tons of merchandise in four hours during a single low tide and loaded 40 tons of copra and received 15 tons of merchandise for Petersen the same day, permitting the *Messageries Maritimes* vessel to depart before nightfall'. He also criticised the production of valueless cacao on galvanised iron sheets which he had previously brought to Emile My's attention. And that was not all:

In his new arrangement Mr Vibert allows the cattle to run among the young coconuts and, as they are very partial to the young shoots, the plants are destroyed. We had fences

to keep the cattle in the area where the old coconuts palms are, where they cause no damage. This is not suitable to Mr Vibert. It seems all we did is to be changed.

Graham Kerr admitted that much needed to be improved but 'if you intend to keep Mr Vibert on, I advise you seriously to send Mr Largeau for a period to control things'.

For Kerr Brothers the year that started out so full of promise was now full of storm clouds.

As for life in the New Hebrides as a whole, Bernard Deacon the Cambridge graduate who had been in Group since October 1925 studying Indigenous culture on Malekula and maintaining good relations with both British and French people wrote

the truth is, the French Government, and they are in the ascendant here, is interested solely in exploitation commercially. When the native population has gone, as in East Santo, they replace it by cheap labour from Indo-China which appears to be inexhaustible.⁴⁴

Two articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 4 January 1927 raised the problem of how the Indigenous people of New Hebrides were being treated in their own land.⁴⁵ This, as I mentioned earlier, was a subject once completely disregarded but was now receiving attention due to visits of people like Dr Felix Speiser and to books such as those written by the eminent anthropologist Dr W.H. Rivers.⁴⁶ In fact Deacon's visit was directly concerned with River's findings.

The Islanders had no voice of their own about how they were to be governed and in the days of flourishing colonialism, the people who had taken over Islander land gave no thought to Islander needs as distinct from their own. No-one asked whether Islanders actually wanted outside labour to be brought in. Most planters and settlers were not purposely cruel, they just thought white people knew better than the Indigenous black ones; and nearby in Australia, the White Australia Policy and held sway.

After all those years of having their cultural beliefs attacked by missionaries some of the Islanders were beginning to ignore Mission teachings that money was evil. Instead they followed white commercial practice and sold produce to whoever would buy—and they had many takers. This fewer of them were offering their services to white planters. But Islander population was also in decline and there were many theories as to why their numbers were dwindling and more males than females being born.

Pigs and women were the important things to the Indigenous male. Only those with enough pigs of the tusked variety could afford to buy wives—this meant the old men only. The young ones did not get a look-in until they acquired enough money to buy the necessary pigs. To needy planters this would provide an incentive to get Islanders to offer their services—as I will later illustrate—in other words payment for service in pigs. In all ways the Indigenous people got a raw deal.

After Bernard Deakin's study of the situation in New Hebrides, he thought that the religious instruction they received from the missionaries, to the exclusion of the work ethic, was all wrong. 'Make them citizens, not half-baked expounders of the history of the Jews about whom they care nothing.'⁴⁷ If they could not go back perhaps this was a way forward. It was not that Islanders were badly treated, particularly by the French, as Mission propaganda insisted. They were not given the power or opportunity to do or say what was best for themselves in their own land.

Imported labour also impinged on Indigenous life and culture. Viola Cooper, an American and, as she wrote, 'impartial to either of the contending nationalities in the New Hebrides', visited the Group in 1927 and wrote about the labour situation in an article titled: 'British Lack Labour. French Care for Workers'.⁴⁸

She and another American woman, Jean Schoen were on board *St Michel* when it delivered 700 to 800 Tonkinese labourers to French planters on Malekula for which they paid 3000 to 5000F for transport alone:

The planter is then under obligation to pay a specified salary during the period of employment, five years ... and must in addition deposit with the government sufficient funds to guarantee the return passage to Tonkin.⁴⁹

About Indigenous woman also employed on French plantations Cooper wrote:

They are the wives and daughters, and perhaps the sisters, of natives whose homes are in the villages on the plantation. There is no compulsory employment ... Many of the Tonkinese woman of course, are recruited for that purpose, and do work in the fields, but under excellent conditions generally.

She then instanced M. Lançon with a big plantation on Epi who had just returned from Tonkin with 100 recruits, who provided 'the cleanest kind of houses for his "help", including a dispensary where the ill report every morning and a nursery where the women leave their children'.

Cooper then turned to the 'pitiful part of the situation in the New Hebrides ... that the English have not the right to import Indians or other subject peoples under conditions similar to those under which the French act'. She concluded that 'according to the French and also many of the English, the relationship between the two Governments in the New Hebrides was never better than at the present time'.

And she was not wrong as far as French settlers were concerned. With the Franc so unstable they were quite happy for the Condominium to remain in force to save them from further ruinous taxation. They also thought that, ruled by France, they would be impeded by officialdom in Paris, as was the case in nearby New Caledonia.

As for British settlers, if the New Hebrides could have become a British Crown Colony—and not be off-loaded onto Australia which, through the years had supported the New Hebrides Mission and offered settlers nothing at all—well, they too, would have agreed. Meantime the Condominium with all its faults was the better alternative. There was a grim joke in the Group about French 'citizens' and British 'subjects', the point being that, as 'citizens', the French had a say in their government while as 'subjects' the British did not.

So *Entente Cordiale* was not lacking amongst the settlers themselves. They had been getting along with things for years. The source of bad feeling was in Europe, between their respective 'parent' countries, Britain and France; traditional enemies. Both countries suffered badly from the First World War and the fact that France had been occupied by the Germans and England had not, left much instability and unresolved bad feeling against Britain in France.

In this chapter I have described some of the conditions the British Commission would find when it arrived to make its findings. The New Hebrides Committee at the Imperial Conference of October/November 1926 had agreed that a Commission should be convened immediately. The New Zealand Prime Minister, J.G. Coates was willing to go ahead but the Australian Prime Minister, S.M. Bruce delayed making a decision.

As late at 16 December 1926 Bruce told Amery, Secretary of State Colonial Office, that 'his colleagues were nervous on the subject of Chinese labour'. Amery reassured him that the British Government had an open mind on the subject and Bruce replied that in these circumstances he might be able to persuade his colleagues to accept the terms of reference. Something had to be done as soon as possible in view of the risk of immediate transfer of British plantations to French control.

The New Hebrides Mission, for once, was not protesting. It had a strong supporter in England, A.K. Langridge, Hon. Secretary of the John Paton Presbyterian Mission Fund, who told the Colonial Office that the New Hebrides Mission favoured introduction of outside labour

... because it seemed essential for the maintenance of British influence, on which the continuance of our mission work largely depended.⁵⁰

What remained unsaid was that in the event of France gaining control the New Hebrides Mission would be removed from the position it had arrogated to itself in New Hebridean politics where it tried to control the doings of not only the Indigenous people but both British and French nationals.⁵¹

New Zealand agreed to provide a cruiser to take the Commission to the New Hebrides but it had to be back in New Zealand for the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York on 22 February. Sir Eyre Hutson, British representative on the Commission, could not be away from Suva when the Royal party arrived

there. This meant that the idea of immediate action could not be met. Immediate action was regarded as vital by J.G. Coates who 'considered the moral effect of the Commission *vis-à-vis* the French will be reduced unless action follows closely after the Imperial Conference'.

On 17 January 1927 the British Resident Commissioner, Smith-Rewse, was told that a Commission was to be set up and that he, as an act of courtesy, was to acquaint his colleague, the French Resident Commissioner, of the fact.

S.M. Bruce made Australia's acceptance provisional on the alteration of the first term of reference to be studied by the proposed Commission which was, that labour could be provided 'from any source within or outside the Group from which such labour may be obtainable'.

On 25 January Sir Eyre Hutson officially announced the setting up of a Commission 'to report upon the position of British settlers ... with special reference to any disadvantages under which they may be working in comparison with French settlers'.⁵² Interestingly the first term of reference was now, at S.M. Bruce's insistence, 'provision of adequate supply of labour for British settlers'.

The second term of reference was to investigate 'any further measures to assist British settlers in the production and marketing of their crops and to indicate what financial assistance, if any, would be required from the government'. The financial assistance part was a worry to the Colonial Office. There is a remark on the front of this report by a person with the initials S.H. 'I think it is dangerous to support financial assistance in any terms of reference'.⁵³

The Commission was to comprise Sir Eyre Hutson for Great Britain; Brigadier-General T. Griffiths for Australia; and Major-General, Sir G.S. Richardson for New Zealand. The announcement ended 'It is not possible for the Commission to meet in the New Hebrides earlier than April 1927'.

However highly qualified the Commissioners and however sympathetic to the needs of the British settlers, it would become known—rightly, as shown in the first part of this chapter as well as in an article published in a Noumea paper on 19 March—as 'the Commission that came too late'.⁵⁴

An editorial in *Fiji Times* on 1 February also claimed that

... whatever may be the substantive results of the recommendations of the Committee, it is only a matter of time before the big cause of the complaints—the condominium or joint form of Government by Britain and France—will have to be dealt with.

HMS *Diomedé* with the British and New Zealand representatives, Sir Eyre Hutson and Sir George Richardson Administrator of Western Samoa, and H.G. Pilling, Secretary, arrived in Vila on 6 April. They were joined by the Australian representative, General T. Griffiths Administrator of Nauru. After official courtesy calls were made by both the British and French Resident Commissioners and the President of the Joint Court, Count Buena de Esperanza, and the British and French Judges business got underway.

The *Fiji Times* wrote:

The Commission was formally opened at the office of the British Resident Commissioner ... on 7th April. Subsequently the Commission sat continuously from the 7th to the 17th April and for the purpose of their investigation visited Bushman's Bay, Malekula; Tangoa Island and Hog Harbour, Santo, before returning to Vila on 16 April.⁵⁵

Included in the ceremonies was a Garden Party given in Vila by Smith-Rewse on 9 April to which both French and British officials and settlers were invited. The British Resident was popular with everybody.

It was decided to hold the Commission in camera but, at the end of each day, the Secretary would supply a *résumé* of evidence to the Press. All the witnesses 'were more than friendly to the suggestion of the publication of their evidence'.

Smith-Rewse accompanied the Commission 'giving help when it was required, at other times unobtrusive ... Of his wide experience in Pacific affairs, his enthusiasm, his persistent and untiring efforts on behalf of the planters, one could write much. All the planters gave statements concerning their Administrator, and all, without exception praised him. Not one word of criticism was heard in the whole

group'. One man said: 'Tell the Australian public that he's the best Administrator in any British colonial possession' while a Frenchman remarked 'Mr Smith-Rewse is always a just English gentleman'.⁵⁶

To start with the planters called to give evidence were wary. Their previous experience had made them so, but when they found the Commissioners knew their job and asked all the right questions they gradually relaxed. Seventeen planters gave evidence and the *Fiji Times* in its second article published on 13 June, commenting on the fact it had been designated 'the commission that comes too late', mentioned 'one large holder in Santo, who was one of the seventeen [D.H. Kerr], is said to have sold out since and the statement bears evidence of truth, whilst in the fertile little island of Malo ... options are held by the French over four British plantations'. These were the plantations owned by Barclay, Hawkesby, Mat Wells and Shepherd.

The article continued:

At the present moment, French agents are actively engaged everywhere offering to buy on terms which are strictly cash. Behind them stand the French banks and the Government. They realise that if the British get labour their plantations must boom, as must trade, so with the foresight they have shown all along, they are getting in early. One cannot blame them. Quite the reverse, yet one can, and should, blame the British government which turns a blind eye to such a state of affairs.

Delay in holding the Commission was blamed on General Griffiths, who cancelled a ship that was to collect him 'because for some reason best known to himself, the chairman did not find it convenient to come until April. He had, one understands, to make extensive preparations to welcome the Duke and Duchess'.

Four of the planters told the Commission that unless they received a definite promise by 31 July of help that indentured labour would be forthcoming they would 'be obliged to accept a French offer to secure it for them. This entails turning their plantations into French companies with a big percentage of French shares'.

Thirty-one witnesses in all appeared before the Commission, planter, trader, missionary and, 'almost all expressed themselves as well satisfied with the hearing they obtained'. The first sittings were held in Vila, L. Roche, N. G. Ussher, W. McCoy from Efate and D.H. Kerr from Santo being interviewed. This would be the time that D.H. Kerr was also being harassed by strange calls about tree numbers on Turtle Bay and his presence there being demanded by Audoin to sign the contradictory tree count.

Roche was the first witness. He had 2,400 acres, 600 under cultivation. To work his plantation properly he needed '30 natives per annum. Yet, in three years, after strenuous recruiting, he has only been able to raise 39 boys or an average of 13 a year'. With these he kept up copra production and even increased it at the expense of cotton, cocoa and coffee. His cotton figures were 1924, 26 tons; 1925, 24 tons, and 1926, 2.5 tons.

When asked by the commission the average price of copra per acre, the planters gave widely divergent replies. Some put the figure as high as 12 pounds, whilst one, Mr Thomas of Santo made it as low as 5 pounds ... It largely depends on recruiting costs which vary between 15 pounds and 50 pounds, whilst one poor man ... spent 150 pounds and got not a single recruit... The planters ... do not complain unduly of the cost of labour, but of the scarcity of it ... Several ... when asked what they would put the depreciation in the copra output down at, estimated it at quite 10%, amongst whom were Mr Kerr of Santo and Mr Wells of Malo ... The figures re dried copra to the acre also vary, partly due to the climatic conditions, and partly to the distance between trees. Mr Kerr and Mr Thomas, on beautiful fertile Santo, can average up to half a ton of copra to the acre, or even more.

Shortage of labour had a bad effect on copra production but its effect on other crops was much worse, witness Roche's figures for cotton, while Ussher 'gave evidence that his whole 30 acres under cotton were now totally destroyed'. He had 23,000 coconut trees and by scraping up casual workers was able to produce 25 tons of copra for the year which was his total output. If he had 25 labourers he

could produce 170 tons of copra a year. 'When one realised that last year's [1926] copra averaged 21 pounds per ton, the dead loss in sterling was made clear'.

A third article on the Commission's findings appeared in *Fiji Times* 15 June 1927. They were now in the north of the Group at Theo Thomas's plantation at Hog Harbour. For everybody on HMS *Dio-mede*, which transported the Commissioners there,

... all lost their hearts to the beauty of the place. With cliffs rising from the water's edge and a beach of snow-white sand, the plantation conjured up all the glamour and romance of fabled life in the tropics which unfortunately so often proves but a short-lived myth. Although Mr Thomas has the labour he needs to-day ... he may not have it tomorrow ... If one has 20 labourers this year, one might plant out a big plot of cotton, yet when the crop is ready for picking, have no labour to harvest it. To the man who has schemed and dreamed and toiled, what a heartbreak this is. Especially when he sees the little Tonkinese so busily engaged in loading the bales for his French neighbour.

Was this 'French neighbour' August Harbulot to the north at Port Olry or Emile My to the south at Shark Bay? My was at present living with his wife and two sons in Paris and helping Graham Kerr in his negotiations to sell Hog Harbour plantation on behalf of Theo Thomas. My's second son, Jean, was about to return to the plantation at Shark Bay which they had owned since 1916 to grow cacao with his parents to follow later.

Comparing French and British production figures for 1926, the British were still ahead as far as copra was concerned but dismal for cocoa and seed cotton. As for ginned cotton and coffee, the British produced none:

They can't beat the French, hampered and abandoned as they are, yet in spite of incredible difficulties, they put up a remarkably good fight. Australia can't grow cocoa. She doesn't even try and prohibits it with duty, and yet we can't get labour to enable us to supply her demand.

Obviously it was not yet common knowledge that both Turtle Bay and Matt Well's plantation on Malo had changed hands, for the article continued:

Interesting evidence was given by Mr H. Kerr, one of the Kerr Brothers who have a fine large, plantation at Turtle Bay and by Mr M. Wells of Malo. The former showed that he needed 150 kanakas to get the best out of his 1,260 cultivated acres, 1000 of which are under coconuts and 260 under cocoa, yet he is trying to carry on with 35, less than 50% of his required number.

Matt Wells also brought up the question of shipping freights. He grew excellent cotton but

... it would have cost so much in freight to ship a crop to England, although already baled, [that] it simply was not worth it, though the price of cotton was booming ... Mr Wells is not unique in his tale of shipping charges. Mr Kerr gave interesting data on this subject as did practically all the settlers.

Ewan Corlette, President of the British Planters Association and in charge of Metevan Plantation at Bushman's Bay Malekula was no better off than the others. He was in a good cotton growing area and next door to the French *Compagnie Cotonnière*, run by Caillard

... which has already over 200 indentured Tonkinese and hopes for their complement of 400 before the year is ended.

There were other problems for the Commission to deal with. The first was the lack of Indigenous population in the New Hebrides.⁵⁷ Some settlers like Theo Thomas at Hog harbour 'live near to the

more thickly-populated parts, and can then afford to sign on labour for six months'. However recruiting trips to other islands were expensive and few planters could afford it. Also the Islanders in their natural condition led an indolent life and needed an incentive to offer their services. 'The natives all love grog, and the French know it and pander to it', and also do not hide the fact.

The question of recruiting women was then raised. This was forbidden to British planters by a special Kings Regulation of 1912 which was later modified but was still hedged with difficulties:

A planter can recruit husband and wife together, but only the former can be legally signed on. As it is the woman who does all the heavy work in a native village, the fact that on a plantation she need do practically nothing irks her husband and he becomes dissatisfied... A girl can be taken with the consent of her family, a certain distance from her family home ... [but it] often happens that a girl has quarrelled with her family and wants to leave home. She has been well treated and quite happy on the plantation and when she is forcibly returned against her will, she soon escapes to a French plantation where she is signed on.⁵⁸

The cry of all the planters to the Commission was 'Give us labour'. They did not expect much from Australia, which

... with her tariff bordering on prohibition, has become so unpopular throughout the Pacific, that people are forgetting to ask anything of her. If prohibition is what she wants, well, have it, but remember that it is going to prohibit you from friendship with the rest of the world.

The Commission was convinced that labour must come from somewhere and then turned their attention to where that might be. Java was out of the question as the Dutch Government 'did not permit them to be indentured in countries where they have not been heretofore'. What about Chinese? This was General Richardson's field as Administrator of Samoa which employed Chinese labourers. He said that with tactful handling and good treatment they were excellent but 'importation of women with the men had been tried and proved a big failure'. Also they could not get their services for a term of more than three years which raised the cost above that of Tonkinese but it was fixed British policy that indentured labour could not serve a longer term. The hard-pressed settlers were prepared to settle for this:

Their cost including landing, upkeep and wages for three years, would total roughly about 138 pounds, or 46 pounds per annum ... about 10 pounds more than the Tonkinese cost the French.

The next matter to be dealt with was interference by missionaries.⁵⁹ The article launched into praise for their great work and the many books written praising their achievements. The fact that they were mostly written by themselves and presented a misleading picture, unchallenged at that time, was not canvassed. 'The missionary's chief aim is admittedly the welfare of the native.' No mention of the misuse of power that accompanied such laudable intentions. The author nevertheless drew attention to another side of the picture:

The situation in the New Hebrides is unique, and even those most biased in favour of the missions must admit that the Presbyterians have not recognised this and adapted themselves to it.

The real reason why the missionary 'sets himself against recruiting and tries by every means in his power to discourage it' was part of a power game to make the Islanders conform to Mission plans for them. The plans, however well-meaning, were not part of Indigenous culture. Adaptation by the New Hebrides Mission to anything except its own beliefs was never on the cards.

The missionaries claimed that taking the young men away from village life led to depopulation. The planters countered this by saying that at present

... the old chiefs alone have sufficient pigs to buy the young girls for their wives, but, by the young men signing on for a year they secure enough money to buy the requisite number of pigs for a wife.

Also the planters claimed, with figures to substantiate their claims, that:

... where they recruit both men and women, the births on the plantation outnumber those in a village ... Where a couple are on a plantation with unlimited food, and where the woman's toil is infinitely lighter than in her own village, the encouragement to rear families is much greater.

The article then harked back to the old days when 'the traders were too often ex-gaol birds'. He was obviously thinking of stories put about by early members of the New Hebrides Mission and continually reiterated and embellished by their followers and believed to this day. 'The missionaries learnt to mistrust and detest them'. In fact these early settlers were in general no worse than their accusers but were trespassing on a patch the Mission had reserved for itself with the tacit backing of the Western Pacific High Commission.

The Commission noted 'that the planters, almost without exception, hate both the Presbyterian and Melanesian missionaries' and thought that if the situation were looked at fairly 'at least half of the blame lies with the missionary'.

The Commission, in fact, came to regard the British planters, with negligible exceptions, as

... a remarkably straight, clean-living set, who ill deserve the rough treatment meted out to them. Do men like Evan Collette [*sic*] (president); and Theo Thomas (secretary); of the British Planters' Association, members like M. Wells, H. Kerr, R.B. Morris, F. Fleming, T. Roche, to mention but a few, appear, to any jury on record, like men who would ill-treat their fellow human beings, whether black or white?

No. The missionaries did not accuse them of giving their labour liquor or selling them firearms:

Yet they strive to deny them labour which is tantamount to denying them the right to live.

To soothe Mission feelings the article continued: 'Many of the missionaries should forswear ancient shibboleths and realise that the problems of today, the men of today, are not those of generations past'. This although nothing had really changed except that French ascendancy was challenging the Mission's very position in the Group.

The settlers brought up the hated Kings Regulations 'superimposed ... upon Condominium law [which] affect only the British and hedge them in on all sides'. The New Hebrides Mission were known to be behind the promulgation of the Regulations and Reverend T. MacMillan of Tanna vehemently denied that they were aimed at Britishers but 'admitted that often they meant to hit the French ... Now because of the missionaries' blunder ... the British planter has these added restrictions on top of the actual law of the Condominium'. Which law the French planter adhered to and which, in a nutshell, was exactly why the missionaries were hated by both British and French settlers.

Shipping and trade next occupied the attention of the Commission:

Ten years ago the British owned seven-eighths of the trade in the New Hebrides and to-day the French own three quarters.⁶⁰

British shipping was on a purely commercial and trade basis. Burns Philp, with an Australian Government subsidy, operated in competition with the *Messageries Maritimes* which received French

Government aid in its fight to acquire the New Hebrides for France. *Ballande et Fils* was represented directly on the Board of Management of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris.

The British Government must all along have been blind to the state of affairs, or how could it have let things drift so long?

The author of the article obviously did not know Colonial Office policy for the New Hebrides, which was that the British Government it did not want the New Hebrides and would do only as much as was necessary to maintain the status quo—at the least inconvenience to herself.

The question of freights roused bitter protests. Anyone shipping directly to Sydney ‘although no one ever does’, faces costs of 3 pounds a ton, whereas ‘if one ships from any port whatsoever in the New Hebrides to Sydney by the *Messageries Maritimes Co* one pays about one pound a ton’. Passenger fares also came in for criticism, those of Burns Philp being higher than those of the French shipping companies. ‘Both Burns Philp and *Messageries Maritimes* ran five weekly trips from Vila to Sydney, the *Makambo* charging between 36 and 39 pounds twelve shillings against only 29 pounds 15 shillings on the *Dupleix*.’

Most British settlers considered that Burns Philp was solely concerned with its own profits, but not the author of the article who pitied the Australian company despite its 15,000 pound subsidy from the Commonwealth government, supposedly to serve British interests.

Most of the cargo which Burns Philp collects in the New Hebrides is carried not by them to Australia, but by *Messageries Maritimes* ships direct to Europe.

Then came mention of two big British planters on Santo, of which Kerr Brothers was one, approaching *Messageries Maritimes* to ask for a contract to become a distributing point for British produce:

At first the French firm were willing, but later they revoked their decision and, on being pressed for a reason, gave it that ‘Burns Philp objected’.

In fact Burns Philp and Company were doing very nicely as the sole collector of British produce throughout the Group, which it then off-loaded into *Messageries Maritimes* ships for the trip to Europe, thus avoiding the tariff restrictions levied in Sydney by the Government and adding to French prosperity.

Burns Philp’s Vila Manager defended his company’s actions, but ‘the fact remains that freights are so high that many Britishers are nearly squeezed out of existence. With French competition ... as keen as it is ... one feels that it is time the Commonwealth took stock of the shipping position and tried to remedy a state of affairs unsatisfactory to all, including its own tax payers who pay [Burns Philp’s subsidy to help British planters, although that is not how the article put it]’.

The Commission then discussed Trade; France versus Britain.⁶¹

In considering ... British trade ... it is necessary to bear in mind two facts. Firstly that the French deal in francs ... the British in sterling... When the franc was very low, much juggling was possible. However now that it has risen from 280 to a little over 100 to the pound, the story is beginning to look different ... The variability of the franc is one of the reasons why the French have been so feverishly active in their colonial enterprise. They have wanted at any cost to get as much money invested out of France as possible ... Now the wealth of New Hebrides is limited only by its acreage. First-class cotton, cocoa, coffee and coconuts flourish there and a glance at last year’s exports, over three-quarters of which were French, shows something of the wealth of the group even though it is mostly undeveloped as yet.

Attention was drawn to the French firm, *Ballande et Fils* which was paying ever larger dividends and getting more and more small French planters to deal exclusively with them for all their needs.

The next consideration was the type of government that operated in the New Hebrides. 'Joint government by the British and French—the Condominium Government—is thoroughly unsatisfactory from a purely business standpoint... Under its regime no one has been able to secure a sound title to land even yet'. Burns Philp put the impossibility of finding British investors for the Group down lack of sound title and the difficulty of getting labour.

The French were not troubled about labour but title to land affected them equally with the British:

Why then are there so many French investors ready to take the risk? Although the French government wants complete control of the group, not so most of the French residents, apart from the officials.

This is a common fallacy. Most French residents, on being asked, say 'we prefer the Condominium. If the group were French, think how our taxes would rise'. The British say the same and for the same reason, but insist that 'we want equal conditions with the French'. But 'although taxation is considerably lower in the group than elsewhere, the Government is not necessarily a cheap one'.

Duplication of services for both British and French was mentioned, but the Joint Court, costing 6000 pounds a year to run 'was abused by one and all'.

An English Judge tries breaches of the law between Britishers and the French Judge deals with matters relating to the French, but the Joint Court, consisting of both of these, plus a Spanish President, Public Prosecutor and Registrar, is requisitioned for any dispute between both French and English.

The Land Court came in for the worst censure. 'Although the court has been in existence nearly 20 years, no titles have yet been certified'. In 1914 about 20 titles were published but as they had to wait a full year for counter-claims to be made and the First World War intervened and the Court was adjourned, so they were never gazetted. Now in 1927 the Court is again receiving claims. The rules have been changed from the original British French Agreement of 1906 when 'occupation for three years or more was held to be valid ground for titles'. The Protocol of 1914, not promulgated until 1923, accepted only occupation before 1908 so now confusion reigns.

The last article reprinted in the *Fiji Times* by the 'Special Commissioner of *Sydney Morning Herald*' was titled 'It's up to Australia':

All the Royal Commissions in the world cannot prevail against a question of fact. The New Hebrides are French through their population, and by French economic and financial predominance. But the Condominium can only continue if the Britishers are given back the equal conditions on which it was based.⁶²

It might not mean much—a sigh of relief perhaps—to Britain if the group became French but what about Australia? Surely England did not send a warship, HMS *Diomedé*—'a fact that greatly annoyed the French' according to the correspondent—and Australia and New Zealand choose their Commissioners with such care, unless they meant to help their fellows in the New Hebrides? The final message from the planters was: 'Tell Mr Bruce and the people of Australia that now it is up to them'.

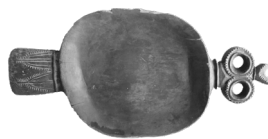
But obtaining help from Australia was not going to be easy. Another paragraph ran:

Who are the traitors? The Britons who have held out for so long, or the politicians who have ignored them? I wish we could wipe the New Hebrides off the map said an Australian Cabinet Minister recently. And that, one feels is the attitude of many in authority at the present time.

I feel that political expediency in Australia required a scapegoat. Why not the firm of Kerr Brothers Ltd in Sydney and Graham Kerr, their agent, for being 'traitors' to the British cause by selling out to the French?

And from November 1927 following a letter to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* Board of Management from Antoine Audoin, it seems the French Ministry for Colonies also had Graham Kerr in their sights for, supposedly with the support of British authorities, taking over Hog Harbour plantation thus thwarting their plans for Santo. He did not realise it, but Graham Kerr had inadvertently placed himself in the dangerous position of being distrusted by both sides.

The death in August 1927 of Smith-Rewse who championed the cause of the British planter also heralded a change in Colonial Office policy for the New Hebrides. Sir George Joy who took over as British Resident Commissioner was not, like E.G. Seago, familiar with the Pacific area. His Colonial Office training was acquired in the Middle East. Britain in despair of the Condominium was gradually drawing away from the sympathetic approach that the Western Pacific High Commission, under Sir Eyre Hutson in support of Smith-Rewse had brought about.



Endnotes

- 1 See my father's typed Diary Notes and Records for Reference 1892-1943.
- 2 See White Envelope No. 5, Cote B 1927, No. 7. Strangely I could not find the Special Condition [in the *Outre Mer* Archives? ed.] which was such a vital part of the option my father offered. I have a French translation of it made by Emile My as well as the original English one among his papers, in which it is omitted. I think papers found in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris are part of the case used against him in the future trials held in Noumea, and that the Special Condition in both the English and French versions had been purposely removed. It was not a figment of my father's imagination because Emile My referred to it, telling him he must insist on its conditions.
- 3 See White Envelope No. 5, Cote B 1927, No. 7.
- 4 In French: *Conditions particulieres. Elle prendra tous les biens presentement cedés dans l'état ou ils se trouveraient le jour de l'entrée en jouissance.* See the endnote before the preceding one. The words in this paragraph that contains this endnote are ambiguous and I (the editor) am unable to sort them out. Emile My was a good friend and colleague of Graham Kerr's. Could he have left the Special Condition out of his translation of the option from English into French (for Graham Kerr to use in France) or was he translating into English (for Graham Kerr) a French version of the option which contained the Special Condition? If he had left the Special Condition out of any documents to be presented formally to the French this would have been accidental because as the author says, Emile My insisted upon the Special Condition.
- 5 See my father's 1927 diary, 20 Jan.
- 6 See my father's 1927 diary, 3 Feb.
- 7 See White Envelope No. 5, Cote B.
- 8 This is important because in the ensuing court case brought against Kerr in 1936, his opponents would argue that the case should be tried in the French court in Vila, not the Joint Court, as it concerned money and was signed in Paris. Of course it concerned money but what was really at issue were immovable objects, i.e. trees, on a piece of real estate in the New Hebrides disputed British versus French. A case that could only legally be heard before the Joint Court, using the law of the defendant not the accuser. As the French brought the case against Kerr, it would be British law.
- 9 Letter My to G.L.S. Kerr 27 Feb 1927 is in White Envelope No. 5 Cote B.
- 10 See White Envelope No. 12, Letters from K.B in Sydney to Graham Kerr in Europe 1926-27: in chronological order.
- 11 In fact before the French took up Kerr's option on 9 Feb, Barclay withdrew his option to sell Sassuli plantation on Malo Island in favour of Renault and by 28 Feb Matt Wells, also of Malo, did the same.
- 12 I will be dealing with this Commission at length in the last part of this chapter. At this time I feel that D.H. Kerr was hoping that the French deal would fall through. In fact he may have actually thought so, after receiving a strange message in garbled French asking him how many coconut and cacao trees were on the two plantations on offer which he knew had been open for inspection since the previous August when Lambreaux was sent to find out.
- 13 See my father's 1927 diary, entries 11 and 12 March.
- 14 This is a rough translation of part of Largeau's comprehensive report which I found in Paris in 1983 in the French National Archives, *Outre Mer*.71 APC, SFNH, 11, No. 29. Kerr Administration. For report see Folder 10, Xeroxes from the French Archives.
- 15 See White Envelope No. 5, Cote B.
- 16 See White Envelope No. 5, Thomas Property File.
- 17 See White Envelope No. 12. Kerr Bros, Sydney, to G.L.S. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927.
- 18 When CGFH finally signed the contract to buy Turtle Bay on 23 March 1927, the *Acte de Vente* with its Special Reservation meant that CGFH had legally committed itself on that date whatever Audoin's report revealed. Not that the Kerrs thought they had anything to hide. In the future when SFNH brought a case against Kerr for misrepresentation, this clause and other documents were not sent to their lawyers who conducted the case which was held in Noumea. Time and time again in Kerr's appeals against their findings, he was disbelieved but in 1952 Kerr's lawyers forced the issue and SFNH in Paris was queried about the missing documents and awkward questions were raised.
- 19 See White Envelope No. 12, Kerr Bros Sydney to G.L.S. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927.
- 20 See my father's diary 15 and 16 April 1927.
- 21 I think that Renault's buying spree had exhausted the available funds provided by prospective shareholders. They wanted Hog Harbour badly and, without Kerr's first option, they were lined up to get it much cheaper by Renault's second option.
- 22 See White Envelope No. 12, Corres between Kerr Bros. Sydney and G.L.S. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927.
- 23 See PMB, MSS Series No 50. Robertson, William Torrie. (Planter Big Bay and Hog Harbour New Hebrides). Papers 1927-1960. Among these papers is a handwritten declaration of his experience when, as Manager for Kerr Bros Ltd of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations in Feb 1927, he accompanied Commandant Audoin during his survey, 'Sometime later after these properties were passed over to Mr Vibert, representing CGFH, I personally saw some fields of cacao entirely neglected and returned to bushland. Large areas planted with young coconut trees were destroyed by the cattle after the fences were removed by order of Mr Vibert'.

- 24 See White Envelope No. 12, Corres between Kerr Bros Sydney and G.L.S. Kerr, Europe, 1926-1927.
- 25 See White Envelope No. 12, Corres between Kerr Bros. Sydney and G.L.S. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927. Louis Vautier in a revealing letter to Kerr from the Sydney office, dated 11 May elaborated further, Commandant Renault, head of CAMNH, and now on his way to Paris, had also bought properties at Surunda Bay Santo, for 15 million Francs plus those on Malo already mentioned, as well as land at Pt Olry. With Hog Harbour also lined up in Paris by Kerr, the French were spending up big on real estate. In fact by the end of the year Kerr would conclude that they had exceeded the finances provided by the unsuspecting shareholders of the companies they had set up.
- 26 See White Envelope No. 12, Corres Kerr Bros. Sydney with G.L. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927.
- 27 Edward Jacomb, *France and England in the New Hebrides: the Anglo-French condominium*, Melbourne: G. Robertson, 1914.
- 28 See White Envelope No. 12, Corres. Kerr Bros. Sydney with G.L.S. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927.
- 29 See White Envelope No. 6, Jacomb Letter File. What he meant of course was that in the case of the French bringing the charge, the British Judge would take it before the Joint Court to be tried under British law and vice versa.
- 30 Later, on 14 Aug when the deal had gone through and the last payment made, Jacomb congratulated Kerr 'on the successful outcome of your deal with the French company. I am very glad to have contributed towards the desired result'. My father had written to him asking for the bill. 'As you know I retired from the practice of Law years ago so I don't want any fee. I am always happy to oblige a friend and it is a particular pleasure to me to have been of assistance to you and your firm who were very good to me in Vila years ago.'
- 31 See White Envelope No. 12, Corres. between Kerr Bros. Sydney and G.L.S. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927.
- 32 See White Envelope No. 12, Corres Kerr Bros. Sydney with G.L.S. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927.
- 33 See Yellow Folder No.1. Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu land-claim papers. The option signed by Julius Petersen to my father to purchase his property is in White Envelope No. 12. This did not mean that the transfer was complete. The claims would have to be described in detail and remain in the Claims office of the Joint Court for a year to allow for counter claims to be lodged. Only after that hurdle had been passed could the claims be gazetted: in this case in July 1928.
- 34 My father at this time still thought that if *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* agreed to take it at the price he had offered, the matter could be amicably arranged.
- 35 See White Envelope No. 12, Corres. between Kerr Bros. Sydney and G.L.S. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927.
- 36 See White Envelope No. 12, Corres between Kerr Bros. Sydney and G.L.S. Kerr in Europe 1926-1927.
- 37 See Black Envelope No. 2, Corres Emile My and G.L.S. Kerr 1927-1929.
- 38 Perhaps Vibert thought he was going to a luxurious place where he could just amuse himself instead of engaging in 'the hardest life imaginable, on account of fever and labour worries' as a fed-up British New Hebrides Planter put it in a letter to SMH 17 May 1927, p. 7. What Kerr Bros. sold was not just the plantation but very valuable real estate right in the centre of Vila.
- 39 Joseph Hawkesby, who also sold land on Malo to Renault, died suddenly shortly after in Sydney on 20 May 1927. He left a wife and son Marmion in poor financial circumstances.
- 40 See White Envelope No. 5. Barclay obviously did not know the hassles my father was having with the French. He having sold out, even at a low price, and now living in Australia, would not suffer in the future as my father did.
- 41 Parts of this letter are given here in rough translation. Vibert had expected things to be very different. A place where he would play 'milord' and go pig hunting in his car with two grey hounds to rouse them out: not managing a working plantation. Thus he was looking for someone to blame. From a letter from Kerr Bros. office, Vibert brought a huge amount of luggage from France, including a trunk weighing about 4 tons which the Sydney office thought might be difficult to unload at Turtle Bay. Perhaps that is why he wanted a wharf built at the expense of plantation development?
- 42 See Black Envelope No. 2, Corres Emile My and G.L.S. Kerr 1927-1929.
- 43 See Paris Notebook No. 2, pp. 87-89 for French copy of letter obtained by me in the Outré-Mer Archives in Paris from 71 APC SFNH Serie 2. Rough trans. is in Red Ledger, pp. 27-28.
- 44 See Deacon A.B. *Malekula: A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides*. London, George Routledge, 1934, Introduction p. xix. See also Glossary of Names—not written, ed.
- 45 Reverend Maurice Frater wrote two articles in SMH 4 Jan 1927, p. 8, 10. Males in Excess. New Hebridean Problems: One-sided Depopulation, in which he gave his ideas on the subject, some of them in contradiction to those of Dr Rivers and in support of Dr. Buxton from the London School of Tropical Medicine, who with Dr S.M. Lambert of the Rockefeller Foundation, had recently spent two years in the Group.
- 46 See short biography of Rivers in Glossary of Names—not written (ed.)
- 47 See the endnote before the preceding one. Intro. p. xxv.
- 48 *Fiji Times* 25 June 1927. Cooper was a midshipman on a freighter and she was at variance with some of the findings of G. McLaren of the Seventh Day Adventist Mission who thought relations between British and French settlers were very strained. McLaren had also written that Tonkinese labour was brought in free of charge to the French by their government which was not correct. For McLaren's article see *Fiji Times* 8 March 1927.
- 49 Jean Schoen wrote two articles see *Fiji Times* 11 July, 1927. New Hebrides. 'Pandemonium' System, Traveller's

- Observations and *Fiji Times*, 26 July, 1927, New Hebrides. British or French. Some Telling Facts.
- 50 This was the man Merton King in 1923 believed to be 'an official of the General Post Office who has no personal knowledge of the New Hebrides'. See WPHC 305/1923.
 - 51 An article to the Editor *Fiji Times* 29 Jan 1927 by 'Britisher' ran: 'The French have succeeded because they receive more generous treatment from their governing powers and have been able to practise the Continental system, regarding wine and women. And what care they for Presbyterian missionaries? But God help the British Trader who attempts to ignore the regulations. (For them the regulations and the Presbyterian Church are one)'.
 - 52 See *Fiji Times* 25 Jan 1927. New Hebrides. Committee Appointed. Scope of Commission. (In Chapter 8 the terms of reference for the Commission as set up in November 1926 cover the same issues though the numbering is different. It is unclear where Stanley Bruce's prevarication comes in or quite what is Katherine Cawsey's source for the text for term of reference one 'from any source within or outside the Group from which such labour may be obtainable' ed.)
 - 53 For the above information and quotations See PRO Reel 4342, C.O. 537/980 Secret. W. Pacific. New Hebrides. C22001 and PRO Reel 4342, C.O. 537/981. Secret. W. Pacific. New Hebrides. C22745. New Hebrides Committee.
 - 54 See *Fiji Times* 27 May 1927. New Hebrides Planters. Lack of Labour. British Handicaps. By the special representative of the *Argus*.
 - 55 *Fiji Times* 25 April 1927, Commission to the New Hebrides.
 - 56 *Fiji Times* 7 June 1927. The New Hebrides. British Commission. (By the Special Commissioner of S.M.H.) Pt I.
 - 57 *Fiji Times* 16 June 1927, New Hebrides. British Commission. Pt. IV.
 - 58 This is the basis for exaggerated missionary tales of French planters employing such women, e.g. Remering in 1912. They might well have been taking pity on the women and the fact that they were sometimes shamefully sexually abused by their 'saviours', does not take away from the fact that women enjoyed no rights of their own and the New Hebrides Mission was not about to grant them any.
 - 59 *Fiji Times* 18 June 1927. New Hebrides, British Commission. The Missionaries and Recruiting. Pt. V.
 - 60 *Fiji Times* 1 July 1927. The New Hebrides. British Commission. Shipping and trade. France v. Britain in the Group, Part VI.
 - 61 *Fiji Times* 4 July 1927 New Hebrides. British Commission. Trade—France v. Britain. Pt VII.
 - 62 *Fiji Times* 7 July 1927. The New Hebrides. British Commission. 'It's Up to Australia'. Pt. VII.

Chapter 10 1928: In Paris Things get Worse but it is Too Late to Withdraw

Emile My at this time lived in Paris and letters exchanged between him and Graham Kerr provide evidence of the machinations that continued to surround what Graham Kerr had thought would be the straightforward sale of the Kerr holdings in New Hebrides, as well as Julius Petersen's plantation at Mate Wulu.¹ Now Kerr, as the holder of the first option to buy—and angered at being forced down in a very underhand fashion by Commandant Renault from 25,000 pounds to 17,000—had taken over Theo Thomas's plantation at Hog Harbour.

On 29 December 1927 My told Graham Kerr that he did not think the offer of the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* to take over Hog Harbour plantation at the price of 25,000 pounds would happen. He also did not believe that they could keep on setting up companies in the New Hebrides, especially after accepting the option of the Malo properties, as they were cash-strapped.

He had then put in an option on his own account, as it had been earlier worked out between himself and Graham Kerr to form an English/French company together. Charles Revel asked My to come and see him, telling him that *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* could still be interested in the Hog Harbour proposition, mentioning more *Parts de Fondateur* for 'Mr Kerr which could not fail to interest him by reason of the large number that he holds'. Revel asked My to see Charles Aupied who again said that Hog Harbour would only be taken up at Renault's price of 17,000 pounds and held out as a bribe the value Kerr would receive in further *Parts*.

Why did they offer *Parts* when they knew it could not now be done under two years, or did they have special friends in the Department of Colonies who could oblige?

Emile My wrote that he had told Aupied 'that I would tell you of our conversation but that I was under the impression that you would hold to the price of your option'. Aupied had then become threatening and told My that what he was doing was bad and that he would do all in his power to impede its successful conclusion. 'Now we know' wrote My.

Then Aupied brought up, once again, the question of the number of trees on Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu which had nothing to do with the matter in hand. Keeping his cool with no comment to offer, My told Aupied that he would fully report to Kerr what he had been told:

It is beyond doubt that Mr Aupied and his friends are formidable adversaries if one has to try and get help in Paris for the setting up of an important company. He well knows that the *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* which was also interested in Hog Harbour, and of which he himself is a director, cannot refuse to give me an option under the conditions demanded. Hence his bad humour and intimidation.²

He then went on to tell Kerr, as he had told Revel and Aupied he would, of the increased value Kerr would receive in *Parts* by virtue of his already large holdings in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. He asked him

... could he envisage accepting an offer between what you have paid for Hog Harbour—17,000 pounds—and the price of your offer, 25,000 pounds, plus extra *Parts*, as a solution to the impasse?

A solution of this kind would have the advantage of re-establishing between you and the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* a friendly atmosphere in which the concealed conflict resulting from the tree count could be settled.

My thought the disagreement was really because D.H. Kerr refused to remain at Turtle Bay after Vibert arrived there, despite the original contract that he would remain until Vibert learned his job. For himself, My would prefer that things regarding Hog Harbour would stay as they were with himself in partnership with Kerr Brothers. He wrote 'Please note that the threats of Mr Aupied do not intimidate me at all'.

On 3 January 1928, My gave Kerr the latest figures arrived at by Audoin and Vibert for coconut and cacao trees on Turtle Bay. Mate Wulu was not considered as they had not been guaranteed.

Hugh Kerr's figures on the option had been 48,000 coconuts; Audoin's were 31,000 and Vibert's, 41,579. The figures for cacao were: Kerr 51,000, Audoin 44,000 and Vibert 48,813. Hence Vibert's figures were not so different from those of Kerr and My thought that the difference could arise from the missing trees. He considered Audoin's figures as 'imaginary'.³

My thought the ongoing business about the trees was because Vibert's administration had not been a success and he needed somebody to blame.

Graham Kerr had asked for the prices of shares and *Parts* on the Paris Stock Exchange. My said there was often no price for *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* shares because of a syndicate to block their sale.⁴ He 'had reason to believe that we shall soon have some most interesting market prices'.

On 14 January Vibert, eager for confrontation, informed Aupied in Paris that D.H. Kerr had refused to cooperate in the tree count—or sign any documents pertaining thereto—at Turtle Bay on 30 April 1927. This was when a formal count was agreed to by Aupied and Vibert in the presence of Monsieur Jean Decoudre the French Deputy Commissioner for Santo. The tree count was to be provided in a combined inventory of properties, real estate and movables sold by Kerr Bros. Ltd on Santo, Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations.⁵

Directed from Paris the scene was being set to show that the Kerrs were not to be trusted. The disputed tree-count document combined with movables was a clever ruse designed to get D.H. Kerr to sign a second *Acte de Vente* which would invalidate the one of 9 February. The Special Condition attached to that one was that the buyers take all the properties at present ceded in the state they are found on entering into possession. The buyers were given until 30 April 1927 to inspect all the irremovables on the plantation which of course included trees and then object, if they found discrepancies.

The buyers did not wait. Instead, they agreed to buy on 15 March 1927. The tree-count was completely up to the buyers and the plantations had been open to their inspection since October 1926 when Lambreaux arrived. The only obligation the Kerrs had to comply with was the later handing over of the properties and arrangements about moveables, stock, plantation equipment, items in the store and such like.

The first and definitive *Acte de Vente* with its vital Special Condition which Graham Kerr would insist on bringing up at his various trials in future years was a sore point with his powerful Paris-based opponents. They, through the years, with other damning documents would carefully hide the Special Condition from their lawyers in Noumea—not to mention the Professor of Law at the Sorbonne whom they also consulted.

On 18 January, Emile My in Paris wrote to Graham Kerr that André Joyer, joint Director with Aupied of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and always friendly to Kerr, was anxious to learn his impressions from his trip to the Group after returning from Paris. He said:

Some correspondence has arrived which does not please the *Conseil*. Mr Vibert has taken offence in strong terms about certain remarks that have been directed to him in mail he has just received. Others—Mr. Taponier for example—thinks that Mr Vibert merits more criticism than praise.⁶

My told the *Conseil* that Graham Kerr was sending a full report. There would be a Board Meeting on 26 January.

The idea of Mr Largeau taking over direction of Turtle Bay from Vibert had been raised and My understood that Graham Kerr concurred. Indeed Kerr was the one who suggested it.

Mr Ancelin, Director of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, had been asked by the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* to put himself at the disposal of Vibert but he could not possibly manage his own job as well as take on Turtle Bay and the Malo properties. My had heard that management of Malo had been offered to Mr Mortensen from New Caledonia and asked Kerr if knew his abilities.⁷ My wrote:

The casual way in which personnel are chosen make it indispensable to find out whether errors are being committed. You are too concerned to allow this to happen, I am convinced besides that the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* receives your suggestions on this subject with great interest.

He also sent him a copy of Audoin's November report.⁸ The part dealing with 'Maintenance and Extension of Plantations', he could not let pass without protest. 'There is one paragraph dealing with the attitude of some vendors who decided to get rid of their plantations, limiting themselves in consequence to making produce, while abstaining systematically from all serious maintenance, at the price of all extension'; Graham Kerr was the vendor referred to.⁹

My considered the accusation 'stupid and wicked':

He accuses you maliciously and stupidly of lack of serious maintenance. Would you blithely let your plantations fall into a bad state before knowing whether you could sell them! It is infantile. I can't believe that Mr Audoin is serious.

My knew that Graham Kerr was not in favour of purchasing lighters to help with the work of loading and unloading of cargo. *Dupleix* provided its own barges. However, if *Messageries Maritimes* made the purchase of lighters a condition of their ships of the Panama line calling into New Hebrides, he asked would that not be a good idea especially as all produce loaded by *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was destined for France?

The scheme was favoured by the captain of *Dupleix*, a smaller ship of the *Messageries Maritimes* Line, and not supported by Audoin. *Dupleix*, while being excellent in the general interest of the New Hebridean small inter-island shippings, 'could only result in subverting the calling of big ships at Turtle Bay'. And he had a point, although he did not labour it.

The fact was not yet generally known that Aupied and his friends preferred to give the initial purchase and removal of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* copra to a private supporter, Tiby Hagen. This necessitated a reloading into the large *Messageries Maritimes* steamers.

My ended his letter with the concluding paragraph of Audoin's report. He called it 'Another bit of malice':

In holding back the sale of Pilotin Island, you have had the after-thought of setting up a British property at the request of your Government.

On the subject of this island, Mr Joyer recalled that you had promised *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* first refusal in the event of a sale...

My continued:

If, in spite of Commandant Audoin's report, you are still ready to do so, it would a beautiful answer. If after that, you succeed in setting up a French company at Hog Harbour [with himself as partner] it would no doubt be the end of what we call in France the gossip of an old woman in her second childhood. [*Des cancans de vieille concierge tombée en enfance.*]

It was all very well for my father's good French friend to joke with him, but I feel that a strong part of the malice directed at Kerr was anti-British and directed at him by the French government itself, as supposedly working on behalf of the British Government to prevent the buy-up by the French of as many British plantations as possible at their own prices and on their own terms, in their efforts to finally be able to take over the Group.

My father now had powerful enemies in Paris: Aupied and his henchmen, Audoin and Vibert with the French Department for Colonies behind them. No laughing matter, however ridiculous, was the assumption that Britain had any such ideas.

Apparently there was talk in Paris of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* taking over Hog Harbour but My thought that the Kerrs were shareholders in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, that company should get first choice. Graham Kerr, after thinking over My's letter of 18 January, cabled him on 2 February that he would be prepared to hand over Hog Harbour to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* for 20,000 pounds and 5000 pounds in *Parts*.

He elaborated on his cable in a letter sent off on 7 February in which conditions were stipulated, the most important of which were: (1) that Kerr Bros. would not guarantee the number of trees on the plantation, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* must do that for itself, and (2) that he would prefer Hog Harbour to be linked to Turtle Bay, but that Vibert must have nothing to do with the management.

Robertson, who with MacManamy the accountant had to be kept on, provided a report that the land north of Port Olry was very suitable for coconuts near the water and for cacao inland in much the same way as Turtle Bay. Sakau was suitable for coconuts and cotton.

Graham Kerr then told My that if his proposition 'is not acceptable to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, we can offer no better, but will push on with the place ourselves'. Communication was slow and difficult. In a letter written on 8 February, before My could possibly have received this qualification to his proposal, he notified Kerr that he had told Charles Revel of the cabled proposition which seemed to interest him but he did not think that Aupied and his followers would agree.

Part of the land *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* proposed taking over was disputed by *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides*. This in itself would not be a difficulty but the fact that there was 75 years yet to run of a 90-year lease of 108 acres from Burns Philp and a provision having been made by Burns Philp that it could not be sold to a foreign flag could be a problem.¹⁰

My told Kerr that on 10 February a new company, *Compagnie des Etablissements Hagen* (CEH) grouping Hagen's business affairs, had been set up in the New Hebrides. His capital is 9 million francs and Aupied is the sole founder. The President of the company was Edouard Picanon with Commandant Renault the Paris Deputy Director and Tiby Hagen the Deputy Director in New Hebrides. Aupied, Joyer, Luc, Vincent, and *Raoul-Duval et Cie* were Administrators.

Aupied promised Hagen that he was to deal with the commercial affairs of both *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* of which company Aupied was also Director. My, representing Graham Kerr as well as himself, protested about the abandonment of direct sale of merchandise and products but there was nothing to be done. The question had been settled in advance. My wondered whether *Maison Ballande* was behind the move and if it was directed against the national line, *Messageries Maritimes*, which he considered, must be supported at all cost.

With strong support in Paris, Tiby Hagen was on a good wicket. Later Graham Kerr would find that *Maison Ballande* was not an enemy. *Raoul-Duval et Cie* of Le Havre had originally been in oppo-



Photo 29: Tiby Hagen at his desk (undated)

sition but when Hagen made this firm his agent for produce instead of the previous one at Marseilles they changed their tune. Both *Ballandes* and *Raoul-Duval* had permanent seats on the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*.

My told Kerr that the report he had sent to the *Conseil Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* had been given, in translation, to Board members. Referring to the tree count and the fact that, to Graham Kerr, the important things were the production figures, based on the number of trees, which his opponents never challenged, My warned Kerr that he must insist strongly, firstly that his option gave an indication, not a guarantee. The Special Condition in His *Acte de Vente* which My knew well from having translated the document into French for Kerr, stressed that the buyers must examine the properties for themselves before accepting the offer. And secondly that Kerr had agreed as a result of Audoin's contradictory figures that Turtle Bay exploitation would be to the profit of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* from 7 May until Vibert took over and that this agreement should be taken into account.

André Joyer did not believe Vibert's figures could possibly result in the amount of produce given and queried their worth. And My wondered why Aupied and his faction kept bringing them up.

On 11 February My told Graham Kerr that his son Jean, aged 28, was going back to New Hebrides to take up cacao growing on Santo and that he himself and his wife intended to rejoin him some time later:

Life in Paris is very dear ... winters are hard and we are in a hurry to see the sun again.

He ran a merchant business in Paris which his elder son Frédéric My would take over with no problems as he knew the business well. His representation of Graham Kerr on *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise's* *Conseil* would not be so easy to arrange. My said that his own knowledge of the New Hebrides had enabled him to give advice based on long experience but as far as Banks and Stock Exchange matters went Frédéric did not have the necessary knowledge. My had asked a friend at the *Banque des Pays du Nord* if he could recommend somebody to take his place. A mutual friend named Mathis, dating back to their school days, was recommended. He was a Director of Companies and very familiar with questions about banks, stock exchanges and companies.

Up against Aupied, the seasoned stockbroker, whose interest was in the buying and selling of real-estate, not produce, Kerr was going to need all the advice he could get.

In another letter dated 17 February, My told him that there was talk of setting up a Syndicate to control the market in New Hebrides. *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise's* ordinary shares were then valued at 250F and *Parts* at 700F. The idea was to find the means to arrive at a value a little more in keeping with the situation of business affairs in the New Hebrides and to bring about a rise in price.

The low value of the French franc on the world market did not help matters. Early in 1928 Raymond Poincaré, the then Prime Minister of France, stabilized the franc at 124F to the pound sterling.

My asked his friend Mathis for advice and was told that it would be dangerous for Graham Kerr to enter the agreement insisted on by the Syndicate. My did not dare to advise Graham Kerr with his large share-holding—with his own small number of shares, it was much easier to stay out of such set-ups.

On 21 February the Sydney office of Kerr Brothers told My that 'they were pushing ahead with our clearing up work, and are now on accounts of Turtle Bay from 7 May to the date actually handed over'.

Graham Kerr received Audoin's report from My on 20 February:

Why, oh why does the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* waste money and time in getting advice from Commandant Audoin—a man who has no experience of the problem of running plantations in the New Hebrides.

Referring to the November report where Audoin had criticised production at the expense of maintenance. Kerr said

... it is quite clear that not much development work can be done with only 225 labour, allowing for sick time and the current work of the plantation. Labour for devel-

opment is a question of the policy of the Company. With the supply of labour available, we practically came to a limit of development.

Whatever Audoin liked to think, Kerr said: 'We are not sufficiently interested in his opinion to enter into controversy with him. As far as improvements before the hand-over, Kerr mentioned very substantial ones

... like the Gordon Dryer; Drying Platforms; house at Point Sanif; a road to the cacao plantation, plus the beginnings of a wharf. This in spite of the difficulty in obtaining both skilled and ordinary labour which, be it Tonkinese or Native, is expensive.

Graham Kerr approved of *Messageries Maritimes* and its Marseilles steamer making regular calls at Turtle Bay, thus avoiding expensive transshipment from the smaller vessel *Dupleix*. He agreed that punts would be necessary to give reasonable despatch to the steamer. His response to Audoin's remarks about the British government supporting the Kerr family in acquiring Hog Harbour and the retention of Pilotin Island¹¹ was that 'someone must have been pulling his leg'.¹²

We acquired Thomas's place purely from a business point of view and we are well pleased with the deal, whether it is under the British or French flag. As to Pilotin Island, the reservation was made by [me] entirely as a matter of sentiment and without any idea of monetary gain.

He agreed that he had told Joyer that

... we were quite willing to give preference to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* if at any time we propose to dispose of the Island but at the same time we expect some movement from the company that they have no mal-intent towards ourselves. Ever since Audoin's interference and famous report there has been nothing but suspicion ... shown us. We are used to dealing [confidently] with responsible people, but Paris seems to have a different outlook.

He finished his letter with reference to Robbie, including a letter he had just received from him.¹³

Nothing is too much trouble for Robertson and there is no doubt *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* lost a good man for Turtle Bay, for which Vibert was entirely responsible.

On 9 March, My told him that the Syndicate to raise the price of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* shares by artificial means was getting nowhere. He thought that the best way to do it would be by having better management both in Paris and New Hebrides; then the shares would rise of their own accord.

He mentioned a Board Meeting on 20 February when again the tree count came up. According to the Board the tree count was to be made part of the inventory, but Graham Kerr considered that the only inventory that concerned him was for moveable objects. My said they are having a tree count made by a 'process-server if you do not accept the count already reached'.

The President, Picanon, and the Board apparently paid serious attention to Kerr's criticisms of Vibert's management but Picanon did not intend to replace him. The rest of the Board limited themselves to asking that M. Ancelin, Director of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, make frequent visits to give Vibert advice. To My this was a bad solution. At the present time, he continued, it was stock exchange matters rather than agricultural ones that seemed to count. Aupied then spoke in defence of Vibert. My said that Aupied considered Graham Kerr responsible because he did not fulfil the clause in the contract by which Mr D.H. Kerr was to stay at the disposal of the plantation, and the Board told My to tell Graham Kerr that he must carry out his obligations.

My continued that the valuable properties the Kerr Brothers had sold in the centre of Vila and in which Ballandes had apparently expressed interest, had been valued by Vibert and Audoin at 4 million francs, at which price Ballandes lost interest. The Board of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* did not agree with the figure given. They considered 1,200,000F a more reasonable price. My's comment was: 'Why give such a mission to Vibert and Audoin?'¹⁴

He then mentioned the contract given to Tiby Hagen and his company. Aupied had arranged that *Compagnie des Etablissements Hagen* collect the copra from *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and deliver it to *Messageries Maritimes* ships going directly to Europe or to any other vessel Hagen designated. He mentioned an actual price paid to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* of 7 pounds, 9 shillings and two pence per ton. The purchase price in France was much higher. It seemed to My that this was far from advantageous. He said: 'You know the costs of copra and could give a better account than I could of the profit given to our useless intermediary [Tiby Hagen].' The Board itself had not been asked to give its opinion of the Hagen contract and My had only just heard of it.

By reason of Kerr Brothers' big share holding in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, My thought that it would be good if the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine*, a shareholder to the amount of 7 million francs, could represent him on the *Conseil* now that My himself was returning to the New Hebrides, or at least suggest an appropriate person. It was a matter that he thought needed my father's' serious attention.

From another letter of the same date, My told Graham Kerr that he had seen Revel and Aupied about his offer to hand over Hog Harbour for 20,000 pounds plus shares to the value of 5000 pounds. Aupied, however, was only interested in Renault's price of 17,000 pounds. Aupied admitted that Graham Kerr had offered to extend the date of acceptance but money was the problem and My told him that Aupied was finding it difficult enough to get finance to pay for the Malo plantations. He then went into various steps Kerr could still take to make his option acceptable. If they were acceptable, My thought that *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* might be interested.

On 16 March My added that there was a 'ball game' going on between *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* and when the Hagen contract was signed, which gave Hagen what really belonged to the *Conseil of Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, the entanglement could only lead to regrettable results. He did not have an answer to the problem of whether Kerr should stick to his rights or simply to sell. But it would be important for him to reach an arrangement with *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides*.

My received a letter from Graham Kerr on 21 March that laid the matter to rest. Kerr was angered by the methods of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* which,

... many months after taking possession are still counting trees, contradicting their own figures and everyone else's. On 27 January 1928 *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* wrote us giving a 'tree by tree' count by Monsieur Vibert, but three days later they advise us having received a cable from Vibert contradicting his own figures ... We are tired of these methods ... Not once has the production been disputed—the only thing that really counts. We do not offer or accept any compromise ... We have decided to withdraw any offer to them of the Thomas property, any threats of Monsieur Aupied notwithstanding.

On 24 March M. Luc who gave his address as 'Bourse', or Stock Exchange, Paris, sent My a notice about a meeting to discuss the ordinary shares and *Parts* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, mentioning that various articles had appeared in the press. Luc wanted My to let him know by 28 March whether he would accept the reduction in price for all or part of his shares or *Parts*, to 280F for the first, and 1000F for the second.

My immediately wrote to Graham Kerr telling him of a meeting held on 22 March attended by *Messageries Maritimes*, Aupied, Joyer, Luc, a Banker Perles; Verucken (sic, probably Vereecken) representing *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* shareholders; Lepeytre representing an important group of shareholders; and himself. They wanted to present some interesting options to financiers and the

newspapers. My told them that, as far as Kerr, a large shareholder, was concerned, he could not answer and that the latter in distant Australia could not respond by the due date. It was thought the reduction in prices would be of interest to financial newspapers, hence the articles in the press.

He also told Kerr that Malo was being taken over by *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and that *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* had offered to buy the erstwhile properties of Kerr Brothers in Vila for 1,200,000 F; *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* conserving 1500 metres parallel to the edge of Rue Higginson. Nangire was to remain outside the arrangement.

On 30 March My in another letter wrote that Aupied had told him that if Kerr would accept shares to the value of 5000 pounds on the increase of capital available, there would be no further discussion of the price. My told him he would tell Graham Kerr although he thought from the tone of Kerr's last letter that it was too late.

My's next letter, written on the following day, 31 March, was not helpful. Audoin had cabled that D.H. Kerr had not been present in Vila at the signing of (the second) *Acte de Vente* on 30 April 1927. That, and the demand D.H. Kerr had made for an exact translation of its terms had, My feared, been interpreted in Paris as delay-tactics and all the grievances had resurfaced.¹⁵

Four 'doleances' (complaints) were noted: (1) refusal to sign tree count; (2) refusal to help Vibert settle in; (3) withholding of office accounts like bills of lading invoices etc; and (4) delay in sending accounts from 7 May.

The *Conseil* believed that the Inventory that D.H. Kerr refused to sign, should cover the number of trees. My said Kerr did not agree. He had hoped that the Board was easing its demands, as Joyer had concluded after looking at production figures that those of Audoin and Vibert were not correct and Aupied was of the same opinion. But in spite of all this they required an inventory of trees signed by Kerr for their accountant.

With respect to (3), accounts dealing with production, bills of lading and so on. My explained that they would have been handed over with the other documents. And with (4), accounts after 7 May, My told the Board that such delay was not unusual as they were difficult to establish.

The crucial point at issue was (2) which was the refusal of D.H. Kerr to carry out his part of the deal and help Vibert. The Board told My that if Vibert had made mistakes it was because Kerr had refused to give him expert advice. If Kerr or Robertson had stayed on the plantation, Vibert would have learned his new job hence he was not responsible for the outcome.

My told Graham Kerr that the Board needed his cooperation and that he had the impression that all its members wished for amicable relations with him. None of them believed Audoin's stories and, 'entre nous', My did not believe the other companies had much time for him either.

André Joyer insisted that My explain to Graham Kerr that his relations with *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* should not be influenced by Audoin's findings and that he personally would be very happy if an amicable agreement could be reached. He explained that accounts after 7 May were needed for the audit before 30 June.

On 4 April, after attending a Board Meeting at which transport costs were discussed, that is shipping direct by *Messageries Maritimes* via Panama or those of Hagen My told Kerr that '*Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* remained as a gift to *Etablissement Hagen*'.

Next day the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* received a cable from Graham Kerr about the state of Turtle Bay plantation to which no attention was being paid:

Livestock over-running crops. Are shareholders satisfied? We are not. Send a capable manager. We do not ask for favours for our friends but we demand that direction of the plantation be given to a capable man. This is very important for us and for other shareholders. We have learned from a reliable source [Robbie] that the cattle and horses have free access amongst the cocoa trees and young coconuts ... It takes years to make a plantation and very little time to destroy it. If a more effective method of running the plantation is not found, it will be necessary for us to appeal to all the shareholders so that action can be taken to safeguard our interests.¹⁶

On 5 April My told him that instead of the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* making decisions in the interest of shareholders D.H. Kerr was to be made responsible for the mess by not remaining with Vibert. My thought there was something illogical about all this:

You pointed out the situation. You proposed remedies, nobody listened, and, at the same time, reproached you for not carrying out your agreement. First of all they did not want to send Largeau and now, that they agree that he should go, he probably will not accept.

Joyer had had another talk with My about the Board not taking Audoin's figures seriously, and he was prepared to write to Kerr to that effect. My then remarked and he was sure that Kerr would agree: 'How come a Jack-of-all-Trades was employed on the job? His findings seem to be of more importance to them than they will admit.'

My was pleased Graham Kerr was happy with Robbie's report on the future prospects for Hog Harbour. Now that *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was out of the picture it might be the time approach *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* regarding registration.

On 9 May Kerr's reply to My's 'doleances' letter of 31 March arrived. Kerr wrote that only the last of these had any justification, respecting (1) the tree count:

A full inventory of livestock, tools, working plant together with stock in store was taken both at Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu when Vibert arrived. It was never in the writer's mind when making the engagement of 9 February 1927 that immoveable things were to be counted. They sent a man, before buying, to see what was offered; but naturally, movable things would have to be checked when handling over, and stock in store would have to be taken to establish the value of same. If they think we should count trees and perhaps blades of grass we are not in accord at all.

With (2), the refusal of D.H. Kerr to help Vibert, Kerr wrote

... that falls to the ground entirely, as we were never given the opportunity. We much regret we were not allowed to interfere in any way with the running of the place. That is our loss as well as the Company's.¹⁷

On (3), office accounts, invoices, bills of lading etc these

... were open for Messrs Vibert and Gooding and they accepted the cost price and gave us an undertaking that amounts would be paid.

With (4) about not receiving accounts to 7 May:

We were unfortunately delayed in rendering these, waiting returns for Copra shipped to France. However, they were all complete and sent to the Company on 14 March last.¹⁸

Meanwhile Graham Kerr, who had been busy settling into a new office, announced the arrival of Jean My in Sydney by *Commissaire Ramel* and his departure for the New Hebrides on *Dupleix* on 20 April. Commandant Renault was also there and left for the New Hebrides on the same ship.

Graham Kerr referred to the plantation and wondered what the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* intended to do to run it properly:

The extraordinary thing is that we are blamed for things going wrong. We were quite willing to run the place (as arranged) for up to 15 months, but were not allowed to. Why did the Administration not make the necessary arrangements for us to carry on? Vibert went there with full authority—we had none. Where does the blame attach to us? It is ridiculous.



Photo 30: La Perouse, May 1928, during a visit to Sydney by Margaret Taylor (née Margaret Graham Kerr) and her daughter Flora from New Zealand. Left to right: Jimmie Nicol, Mary Kerr, Katherine Kerr, Margaret Taylor, Len Kerr, Flora Taylor and Muriel Kerr.

Emile My told him on 27 April that he and his wife would be leaving France on 13 June on board *Céphée*. He noted that Graham Kerr was surprised to see Renault in Sydney as he had himself just learned of Renault's departure. *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* had kept it secret wishing to surprise its personnel in the New Hebrides and thus find out the situation there.

With the arrival of *Céphée* in Sydney on 30 July with M. and Mme. My on board, Graham Kerr no longer had first-hand news of what was taking place in Paris.

At the beginning of 1928 his five children—Joyce 14, Muriel 12, Katherine 10, Margaret 8, and Len 5—were sent to Osborne a boarding school at Blackheath in the Blue Mountains.¹⁹ This was our first



Photo 31: The Kerr children in Osborne College uniforms at a picnic near Blackheath in the Blue Mountains mid 1928: standing left to right; Katherine Kerr, Margaret Kerr; sitting left to right: Rachel Nicol, Hugh Kerr, Joyce Kerr, Sheila Mashman, Graham Kerr, Muriel Kerr (just behind), Len Kerr and Agnes Kerr. [Katherine Kerr (on 17 June 2018) can't quite remember whether Rachel Nicol also went to Osborne but it seems possible as her parents were living on Tanna in this period ed].

time away from home. Our parents were trying to get us settled at the school before their proposed trip to Europe early in 1929. Without us there they were able to invite their friends the Mys to stay at our home in Sydney, but the Mys were anxious to press on and Graham Kerr accompanied them to Vila when *Céphée* departed for Noumea on 11 August.

Earlier, on 6 August, Perkins, Stevenson & Co, Kerr Brothers' Lawyers, drew up a Power of Attorney for G.L.S. Kerr to act on behalf of the firm and Emile My, to set up a new company from their combined ownership of Hog Harbour, East Santo. This was to be registered in the New Hebrides under British and French law and to be known as East Santo Plantations (ESP).²⁰ The Kerr family were to have 17,000 fully paid up one pound shares and Emile My 2,550.²¹

What both Merton King and Geoffrey Smith-Rewse had warned the Colonial Office would happen if they did not allow British planters outside labour, was now taking place.

Now follow extracts from a letter Robbie sent Graham Kerr from Hog Harbour on 19 March:²²

Our 'Dear Friend' [Vibert] went to Noumea two *Dupleixs* ago. He has made a fine mess down there. I believe he has done away with all gates as they were too much trouble to open and close. I am told that cattle and horses are all through the cocoa now. The



Photo 32: Blackheath 1928: left to right: Ray Nicol, Hugh Kerr, Margaret Kerr with doll, Muriel Kerr, Sheila Mashman, Agnes Kerr with Len Kerr on her knee, Katherine Kerr, Graham Kerr and Joyce Kerr.

Lunawanna, or *Saint [Jeanne d'Arc]* something, as they have named her now, went ashore in the blow and is pretty badly damaged ... I believe, when *Lunawanna* returned last time, she [had] one recruit. [Vibert] mustered all the labour and demanded to know how it was that when Mr Robertson was here the ship always got boys and now he could not get them. The answer he got was 'Me fellow no savee fashion belong you', so he promptly signed the boats-crew back for a year and laid up the ship so no one is being returned. The latest yarn the French have about him is that he cut paw-paws for posts for his Tonkinese houses. We have them all wondering how we are getting the labour. Very few of them did much good last year and they ask me what kind of grog we give them here.²³

Robbie continued with a tale that one of the Hog Harbour labourers, Silas Meralav, had told him. 'The French try to get Indigenous labour by giving them grog, "but the boys won't sign as they never get home when their time is up". He himself was confident of being able to get plenty of labour.'

In Vila on 20 August Graham Kerr went to the British Government Offices to see F.E. Wallace, his lawyer, and arrange with him and Coursin, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise's* lawyer, the necessary



Photo 33: Kerr children and family friends picnicking at Kurrajong, Blue Mountains, in August 1928. Left to right Mrs Swarbrick, Mrs Hadley (neighbour to the family at Kermadec), Billy Perrot, Mr Swarbrick, Miss Hadley in white blouse, Mr Hadley, Len Kerr, Katherine Kerr, Margaret Kerr, Muriel Kerr and Joyce Kerr.

title deeds for the final transfer of property which would require his signature when he came back from a visit to Hog Harbour. Also discussed was the on-going Vysuck Estate dispute which I will deal with later.

On the way north *Dupleix* called at Diamond Bay where Kerr was met and taken to his place by 'young Lançon'. At Norsup, Malekula, Caillard came on board to see him. At Second Channel Robbie arrived in *Skandia* to see him, and he interviewed clients. Then he went to Hog Harbour, his first visit there as owner. He was up early on 24 August and went in *Skandia* with Robbie and Stephens north to Port Olry:

Ashore to see the country. Very good coconut country ... similar to Hog Harbour. I would not recommend it for cacao. The landing is good with a good steamer anchorage.

Next day he went to Turtle Bay in *Skandia* where, after an interview with Vibert, Gooding and the accountant, he was to board *Dupleix* for the return trip to Vila, via the Banks Group. Robbie and Stephens stopped overnight on Pilotin Island to pick up some coconuts to plant at Hog Harbour.

Graham Kerr was back in Vila by 28 August where he went to see Wallace and

... ran through draft transfer. I thought they would have had it all beaten down to practical form but I am afraid that Wallace is a bit of a messer. I find they have put land on Epi and Ambrym in—land sold some years ago. Also they have made a separate deed for *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* but not connecting *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* with it.²⁴ Went up to Coursin's with Wallace. Audoin and Taponier were there. Arranged for necessary alterations. Went on board. Have appointment for them to come off and we will complete on board. Signed the various documents and received undertaking signed by [Tiby] Hagen to give cheque on Sydney for 1186 pounds balance of account.

There is no mention of a return visit on board however. Rushed for time Kerr went ashore to 'square up with Burns Philp and Co. and Customs then back on board and *Dupleix* left at once for Noumea'. There was in fact no return visit. Audoin had a letter delivered on board instead. Dated 28 August, it was a legally drawn up conveyance witnessed by Wallace and Audouin of the landed property, as well as the moveables which Graham as agent for Kerr Bros. had sold to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*.

When Kerr read it, after the ship sailed, he found that a property called Makapai on the island of Emae which Kerr Bros. had sold to two native chiefs in 1912 had been included by Wallace by mistake.

He also found that he was expected to sign another inventory which his representative (D.H. Kerr) had refused to sign on 30 April 1927 when the first payment for Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu had been made. Here, once again, we are back at the disputed tree count which Graham Kerr declared and would continue to declare was not part of the contract. When, on 20 March 1927, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* took up the option with its Special Condition. This was that what they signed for was what they got. As this was before the three months granted for *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* to see what they were buying was up so that was their problem. But he had strong adversaries who were trying to wear him down. Audoin wanted him to go to Turtle Bay and in the presence of a process-server to sign the tree inventory.

Of course Graham Kerr did not intend to be caught that way. The French now found that Graham Kerr's Power of Attorney to act for Kerr Bros had expired and refused to pay the balance of money owing to the firm for the sale of the two plantations. This power had been obtained for him while he was in Paris in 1927 and he agreed to have another one drawn up by his Sydney lawyer, who thought his old one should still have been valid.²⁵ He then contacted Wallace in Vila who wrote to the Joint Court on 6 September to tell them that the Conveyance of 28 August of properties by Graham Kerr to Audoin, representing *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was incomplete, as monies owing to Kerr Bros had not been paid and the Conveyance was not legally signed as the Power of Attorney for Kerr to act had expired.

On 11 October a new contract of Conveyance was drawn up by Wallace according to English law which enumerated all the property in the original deed of sale, minus Makapai which had been included by accident.²⁶ It was signed in the British Residency by Wallace, acting for Graham Kerr, and Audoin representing *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*.

There continued to be problems with the conveyance and on 15 December Wallace wrote to Kerr that two other pieces of land, Saigh and Punguia, which had been included in the 28 August transfer by accident, were being claimed by the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* as well as Makapai.²⁷

Wallace told Kerr that he had written to M. Coursin (*Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise's* lawyer) stating that we expected the new Conveyance of 11 October to be used and suggested *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* withdraw all the old ones and hand them over to us, or cancel them. Coursin had replied that we seemed to object to the use of the transfer because they transferred more than we were prepared to transfer and asked for particulars of Kerr's transfer of Makapai. Wallace then said that our objection to the use of the transfer of August 28 was that they were not the deeds of the Company. 'The purchasers themselves objected that the Powers of Attorney had expired, and had refused to pay on the faith of the transfers.'

Coursin said that he would have to discuss the matter with M. Audoin. Paris headquarters advised him that *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* would not withdraw from the conveyance of 28 August; they would use it as they deemed proper and that on proof by production of legal transfer of Makapai they would renounce their rights to it.²⁸ As to the other two pieces, Saigh and Punguia, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* reserved their rights to them in case the people who purchased them from Kerr opposed their claim.²⁹

It seemed to Wallace that the only thing to do was to put the facts before the Joint Court stating that 'your Company does not recognise in any way as its deeds, the ones executed on 28 August under Power of Attorney and that its only deeds, are those of 11 October'.³⁰

On 17 January 1929, in reply to Wallace's letter of 15 December 1928, Kerr Brothers sent Wallace their original conveyance of Makapai to Mai natives filed with the Joint Court in 1923. 'Copies of transfers Punguia and Saigh were made and went to M. Coursin, acting for Hagens etc. some time ago' and copies will be sent again. They also sent Lease No. 13 that Burns Philp and Company Ltd now endorsed to East Santo Plantations Ltd and a copy of Conveyance Kerr Brothers Ltd, now in liquidation, and East Santo Plantations.³¹

It is important to know, despite evidence to the contrary, that the aborted Conveyance of August 28 would in the future be the only one recognised by Graham Kerr's opponents. To them the second legally amended one signed by Audoin himself, did not exist.

Again the insinuation is that Kerr is dishonest, acting illegally with no proper Power of Attorney and now removing properties not included in the original option of 9 February 1927, despite the fact

that he provided all the documents from the Joint Court to prove his case. Vibert and Audoin, although Graham Kerr did not yet know it, were building up a damning case against him. Signed by Steinmetz, Acting Court Registrar, the Conveyance of August 28 was gazetted at the Joint Court on 19 October.³²

Back in Sydney Graham Kerr was getting down to other business that resulted from the sale of most of Kerr Brothers assets in the New Hebrides.

On 24 October East Santo Plantations was incorporated under the provisions of the Companies Act of N.S.W. with its registered office in Sydney. All its operations were carried out in the New Hebrides where all its moneys were invested. The Company did not derive any income from sources in the Commonwealth. Income derived mainly from the export of its products, produced in the New Hebrides and duty paid there on all goods so exported. This company owned by Kerr Brothers. Ltd of Sydney and Emile My of New Hebrides comprised properties at Hog Harbour and East Santo.

At the same time the Kerr Brothers Company Ltd—set up in 1909 to administer the properties in the New Hebrides that were now transferred to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*—went into liquidation, a new company of the same name set up in its place to administer East Santo Plantations. Kerr Brothers Ltd had a name for honest dealings with both British and French settlers and it was thought that a new name might detract from the good-will thus generated.³³

On 5 December the 17,000 pounds worth of fully paid up shares in East Santo Plantations were issued in the names of G.L.S. Kerr, D.H. Kerr and their three sisters Mary Kerr, Agnes Kerr and Catherine Johnston.

On 20 November the new Kerr Brothers Ltd had its first Board meeting in the office of their solicitors, Perkins, Stevenson & Co. in Sydney and Graham Kerr appointed Managing Director.

In the future, Paris adversaries would refuse to accept that the new Kerr Brothers Ltd, inaugurated under the Companies Act of 1899, and officially recognised under a Statutory Declaration signed by G.L.S. Kerr and B.W. Perkins, Notary Public, on 23 November 1928, was not the one liquidated at the same time that East Santo Plantations Ltd was inaugurated and all the above-named people would later be charged by their French adversaries with wrong-doing.³⁴

At this time all was not well with the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in Paris. On 28 November Emile My, now with his son Jean on Santo, knowing that Graham Kerr was shortly to visit Paris, told him that he believed that M. Henri Girot, a Director of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was not satisfied with the state of things and he thought that he would have in him an interesting ally. He also thought that Kerr should get in touch with M. Henri Lepeyre, Attorney of the *Banque Française d'Afrique* in Paris, who represented an important number of shareholders and was not satisfied with how things were going. Emile My thought Graham Kerr's opinions would carry more weight with shareholders than those of the *Conseil*. He believed these two men could put him in the picture as well as Charles Revel, who was on bad terms with most of the Board.

Emile My told Graham Kerr that he stood firmly behind him and that his son in Paris, Frédéric, who represented his own father at shareholder's meetings, backed Kerr all the way. The first *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* would remain in office until the annual General Assembly in 1932, when a new Board would be appointed, although it always had the right to remove Directors before the due date.

My also told him he should be able to get a list of shareholders at *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* headquarters in Paris. He concluded by saying that he had met Vibert on board *Laperouse* who said that the company balance sheet to 30 June 1928 had been cabled to Paris and he was very pleased with it. For himself, My wrote, he would be 'curious to see this beautiful balance sheet' but at least its publication should raise share prices.

As I suggested earlier, the dispute with the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and the French Government about the boundaries of Annie Petersen's Vysuck Estate was continuing. On 26 September F.E. Wallace wrote to Graham Kerr seeking information:

Your Claim is caveated by the French Government, and by the SFNH. I do not understand why the SFNH comes in at all, for they sold to the French Govt ... It seems to me that the real question at issue is what were the boundaries in the original deeds; a question of identification only ... You will see from the plan [which was enclosed] that the

SFNH and the French Govt. have different ideas about the Southern boundary, though the same deed is the base of their claims.

He asked Graham Kerr to send him all papers in his possession dealing with the Vysuck Estate including those of Edward Jacomb:

I have had a talk with Mr Bell and he speaks of a survey made by Giraud, at which, the then Manager of the SFNH and one of you were present, when the present line was run. Have you any record of that? That line it appears, was where the present French Residency fence stands.

As soon as I can, I shall have a talk with Mr Larney about the boundaries; he is at present in the field.

Robert Larney had been appointed Surveyor to the Joint Court in 1923 but his appointment was held up until 1924 because of French objections. Now at last with the Joint Court open for land registration he was getting down to work.

On 12 October Kerr replied:

In regard to the disputed boundary with SFNH, many years ago, owing to the uncertainty of actual boundary, a straight line was arranged and accepted between the late J.W. Kerr and the late J.S. Giraud, then manager of the SFNH. It was a give-and-take arrangement and covered the boundary in question as well as the boundary on other side towards where the French Hospital now stands—land belonging to Kerr Brothers at that time. Unfortunately there was no deed fixed covering the arrangement ...³⁵

Larney's report on the matter would not be ready until the following year but it is sensible to deal with it here.

On 24 October 1930, the Joint Court, Land Registration Jurisdiction, Judgement 69, Application, No. 43, Efate, would be brought down in favour of Annie Petersen. 'Costs of the two caveats to be borne respectively by the SFNH and the French Government.' Signed by Count of Buena Esperanza; French Judge, Jeanson; British Judge P.C. Hubbard; Acting Registrar, Steinmetz.

Wallace thought that the matter had been really one for the surveyor and sent my father an extract from Larney's report:

I consulted Kalsakau (Chief of Vila) and two old native men... and, with the descriptions given in the original deeds of purchase from the natives, I have found ample evidence to satisfy me that the boundaries of the 'Vysuck' Land are substantially as described on the plan deposited with Petersen application No. 43 Efate.

All three natives mentioned above well remember the transactions with Petersen, Macleod and Chevillard; in fact they were present at the times the sales were made, and subsequently went over the boundaries many times with all three purchasers. The ground surrounding the Registrar's House, these natives aver, was never sold to, or occupied by Macleod and they point out too that the small house forming the Southern portion of the Registrar's House, was for a long time occupied by the Petersen family or the Kerrs who were Petersen's attorneys. These natives pointed out to me various trees and marks which were the original marks of the land sold and also the ancient tribal boundary marks.

Larney was

... quite convinced that Macleod never owned the land the Registrar's house is situated on; neither did he own the land on the East of the Registrar's house which was Erakor tribal land and would never have been sold to him by Vila natives.³⁶

I imagine that the finding in favour of Annie Petersen and her attorneys, Kerr Brothers, would have made the French Government more determined to persist with its claims against the Kerrs.

Some of the first part of this chapter was written with the benefit of hindsight which was naturally denied to Graham Kerr. He went about his life at this time thinking that all would be well; discussing *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* matters with Commandant Renault when Tiby Hagen brought him to Kerr Brothers Sydney office on 18 April 1928. The future looked optimistic. He was certainly thinking 'French'. On 10 May Miss G. Krasker who had just returned from Paris where she had worked with a big commercial firm was appointed to deal with French correspondence for Kerr Bros. Graham Kerr was no linguist although he could understand much of what was said to him.

Several catastrophic events took place in New Hebrides in 1928. On 17 January Vila was the centre of a fire which resulted in considerable loss of life. Ballande's Store and Bulk Store and de Béchade's Bulk Store were destroyed in the blaze. Charles Deligny, Manager for Ballande's, was among the 13 who died and there were many injured.³⁷

This was followed by a severe hurricane on 8 February, news of which was brought to Sydney by *Makambo* on 26 February. I referred to this trip in the first part of the chapter. It was when a truck carried on deck for Kerr Brothers was lost overboard when *Makambo* was battling its way to the New Hebrides. Ballande's Second Channel Store was badly damaged. According to *Fiji Times*:

Eighteen luggers and cutters foundered or were driven ashore in the Second Channel, while 11 lives were lost when a 60-ton trader capsized ... At Hog Harbour the big copra surf boat and launch were lost, while some plantations in Malo Pass lost 1000 trees.³⁸

Yet another aspect of life in the New Hebrides was reported in Auckland by J.W. Mansfield of the New Hebrides Mission. Referring to the Joint Court and its activities he wrote:

Three Judges presided, an English Judge [Clifford Francis], a French Judge [G. Sachon], and an 'umpire'. [Would that be Count Buena de Esperanza now back in the New Hebrides?]. If it is discovered that the French are losing the case ... all at once there comes an urgent telegram which draws the French Judge away. So the case is shelved and it is not gone on with. It is this one-sided justice which is bringing discredit upon the Government.³⁹

On 27 March the Crane Pacific Expedition from the Field Museum of Natural History arrived in Vila on board the *Illyria*. 'Nothing could have been further from the popular idea of a cannibal isle than Vila', wrote S.N. Shurcliff in a book that resulted from the expedition.⁴⁰

They went first to Bushman's Bay Malekula and then to Malo. On the shore was a large plantation belonging to Mr Matt Wells,

... a hospitable and well-educated Australian planter... At 37 years of age he has one of the finest plantations in the New Hebrides but he has paid for it by 20 years of hard labor and a solitary life. His health has begun to suffer. He says he is 'tired of the whole show and would chuck it in a minute if he got the chance'. Recruiting is one of the big problems of the British planters in the New Hebrides.

Then they went to Hog Harbour on the island of Espiritu Santo where 'we found the largest coconut plantation and the most jovial planter in the New Hebrides', William Torrie Robertson or Robbie who was the manager of Kerr Bros plantation there:

The plantation occupies a broad plain between the base of a long high cliff and the ocean. Nearly 200 natives are constantly at work collecting the fallen coconuts and bringing them in Ford trucks to the drying sheds. From the nuts 4 tons of juicy meat are extracted daily and this amount when dried makes two tons of copra. The latter sells at

a price varying from \$70 to \$100 a ton, so it can readily be seen that the annual income from a plantation may be surprisingly large, especially if the manager, like Robertson, is clever enough to get his labour nearly free of charge.

This is why *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was so keen to buy the Thomas brothers' plantation. It also casts light on the letter Robbie wrote to my father, mentioned earlier in this chapter, about his ability to get local labour where French planters could not

Since the bushman on his own island have plenty of food, pigs and wives ... it is necessary for Robertson and his assistant to board their little yawl and search for recruits on other islands where the necessities of life are not so plentiful ... As an inducement they offer the Kanaka 20 pounds a year ... Pigs are what the natives want—not money. A good pig can be swapped for a wife.

Although Shurcliff does not say so here, D.H. Kerr also shared in Robbie's scheme. Robbie worked for the Kerrs at Turtle Bay before going to Hog Harbour and they both had a very good name with the Islanders. A little island had been bought—was this Pilotin? Robertson told Shurcliff that he had

... three men there who do nothing but raise pigs ... At the end of their time they go [home] happy with the pigs and their 'bokkises' and although I keep most of their wages, they often come back to work for me again.⁴¹

To show that *Messageries Maritimes* meant business, after an amicable visit to Suva, its general manager M. Champmorin announced on 18 May in Sydney that they were upgrading the ships calling at Suva in the coming year. The present end of its line direct from Marseilles via Saigon was Noumea, but he was hoping *Messageries Maritimes* ships would be allowed to call at Suva on the way back to France. This was at present not allowed for fear of introducing malaria, as Vila was one of the ports of call:

The line is making a determined effort to increase its connection in the carriage of copra and trochus shell, the former to be shipped direct to Marseilles and the latter to Le Havre.⁴²

A friendly visit to Suva was made in May by M. Joseph Guyon, Governor of New Caledonia and French High Commissioner for the Pacific. His host was Sir Eyre Hutson the Western Pacific High Commissioner who had recently returned from sick leave in Australia.⁴³

France was making an all-out effort to gain supremacy in the New Hebrides as the following quote from *La France Australe*, referring to New Hebrides as a French colony, shows:

It is of much consequence that there shall be no obstacles put in the way of recruitment [of foreign labour]. It is not merely private interests that are at stake, it is a patriotic question ... We know that the New Hebrides have been placed under a joint condominium of French English. Now since the arrival of the first contingents of Annamites at Vila, nearly two-thirds of the English properties have been bought by our compatriots ... if this miracle continues we shall shortly be the absolute masters of the Archipelago.

The last paragraph referred jubilantly to the British Commission of April/May 1927 as being 'a vain appeal to London' to grant foreign labour to British planters. Their British rivals have had to acknowledge French supremacy: 'They have resigned themselves into our hands.'⁴⁴

I think that Australia's rigid White Australia policy had much to do with the 'vain appeal'. From Australia's point of view there were enough non-white people inhabiting the South Pacific without adding Japanese, Chinese, Javanese and Tonkinese, as the French had done in nearby New Caledonia, and were now introducing to New Hebrides.

Another article referred to the 'death-knell of British enterprise and settlement in the New Hebrides'. That was how Professor A. Radcliffe-Brown put it when addressing the Royal Colonial Institute in London. He considered the Condominium Government as

... the most unsatisfactory arrangement [he] had ever heard of... British planters in the New Hebrides were being forced ... either to sell their plantations, or become Frenchmen.

What he had to say about the Indigenous peoples dying out and the French then bringing in people 'such as Chinese, more amenable to white people and more valuable for economic exploitation' was a paraphrase of the intentions of the French Administration and given in answer to an Australian movement to take over the New Hebrides:

Why should we hand these islands over to you? In ten years there will be no British people left in the New Hebrides.⁴⁵

From the various opinions expressed in these articles it is easy to gain the impression that the French really meant business. The acrimony Graham Kerr was meeting in Paris by his refusal to sell Hog Harbour plantation to interests strongly supported by the French Department for Colonies at their price not his had a strong basis in fact. Emile My, a Frenchman, realised what Kerr was up against but not Graham Kerr.

In November 1928 Raymond Poincaré, French Premier, formed a New Ministry. At this time Stanley Baldwin was British Prime Minister and France and England were playing with the question of whether to disarm or not, while blaming each other for catastrophes that happened in the First World War. Herbert Hoover was elected President of the United States of America on 6 November, while, in the Australian Federal Elections on 18 November, the Bruce/Page party lost considerable ground to Labour.

None of these leaders yet knew what an eventful year 1929 would turn out to be but Poincaré had a preview, when on 5 December a huge French financial scandal rocked the French Capital. Seven members of the government were involved in a get-rich quick scheme set up by Marthe Hanau—500,000 pounds being the sum swindled. This was only one of the financial scandals that would destabilise the various Ministries of the Third Republic in the coming decade.

Endnotes

- 1 For correspondence between G.L.S. Kerr and Emile My quoted in this chapter see Black Envelope No. 2, arranged in chronological order. Archive Box 27.
- 2 Aupied was in the powerful position of being of being director of CFINH, CGFH and CEH at this time.
- 3 On 21 March 1928 Kerr informed My that these figures, presented to the *Conseil* on 27 Jan and sent to him on the same date, were—three days later—contradicted by Vibert in a cable.
- 4 I wonder whether this was to stop Kerr unloading his shares on the market.
- 5 See Paris Notebook No.1 pp. 61-62, from the *Outre Mer* Archives 71 APC SFNH Serie II. This was when D.H. Kerr was fully involved with the Commission to decide whether British subjects should be allowed outside labour. Also the count of immovable objects by the sellers was not part of the original agreement of 9 Feb 1927.
- 6 Jules Taponier was Director of *Compagnie Coloniale de Vati*.
- 7 Kerr to My 28 Feb 1928. 'We have heard very good reports of [Mortensen] ... It is unlikely that he will submit to any non-practical interference from Monsieur Vibert.' Mortensen's services were no longer necessary when the Malo properties were later handed back to *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CAMNH).
- 8 See Black Envelope No. 2, Corres. Emile My with G.L.S. Kerr 1927-1929, 18 Jan 1928. Commandant Antoine Audoin was a retired ship's captain, with no experience of agriculture or running plantations. He lived in New Caledonia near Noumea and represented CGFH by a Power of Attorney issued from Paris.
- 9 That being the case one wonders why they did not do a proper inspection before taking up the option.
- 10 The real problem was that all land claims had to go through the Joint Court, set up in 1910 for the very purpose but, owing to the First World War and French unwillingness, never permitted to do its job until 1927 when Esperanza, President of the Court, was coerced into returning. There was now a back log of about 700 land claims, many of them challenged, meaning that proving ownership and hence registration, was a slow job.
- 11 Ile de Pilot or Litara lay off the entrance to Shark Bay.
- 12 But would the French Government with its fixed ideas about 'perfidious Albion' believe that? *Entente Cordiale* between England and France was badly strained in the late 1920s and 1930s.
- 13 See letter dated 19 March 1928 in Green Folder No. 1. Letters Robertson, W.T. to Kerr Bros 1927-1929.
- 14 A rhetorical question, but both Vibert and Audoin could expect a handsome rake-off from their boss in Paris—Charles Aupied—for such a big real-estate deal.
- 15 Done at the insistence of his brother G.L.S. Kerr in Paris, to make sure it did not cancel out the *Acte de Vente* of 9 Feb with its vital Special Condition, accepted by CGFH on 15 March 1927 that they take all the properties at present ceded in the state they are found on entering into possession.
- 16 See Paris Notebook 2, pp. 92-94. Trans. *From Archives Nationales Outre Mer. 71 APC, SFNH Serie 2, Affaire Kerr*. For rough translation see Red Ledger pp. 92-94, Archive Box 19. See also Paris Notebook 2, p. 89, Rough trans. in Red Ledger pp. 28-29 of another letter G.L.S. Kerr to Director CGFH—Aupied—dated 28 March 1928, criticizing Vibert. The Xerox originals of some material found by me in the French Archives in 1983 and later translated by my sister Muriel are to be found in Folder 10, Archive Box 24.
- 17 The breaking point came when D.H. Kerr was ordered by Vibert to vacate the room he had always occupied at Turtle Bay, being shoved into another much inferior one, already occupied by a person he disliked. He had not expected such high-handed treatment from the person he was supposed to be instructing in the job of plantation management and naturally felt affronted at such discourtesy.
- 18 On 11 June the Director CGFH in Paris acknowledged this letter, telling my father about the interest the *Conseil* attached to his experience and the hopes they placed on the close and fruitful collaboration with 'your esteemed business house'. This formed part of material I found in the French Archives in Paris in 1983. It was part of Bourdinat's and Lomont's defence of Graham Kerr's appeal against the Noumea judgment against him 9 April 1950. See Paris Notebook No. 2, p. 96. Kerr also sent a copy of his letter to CGFH to Emile My. See Emile My letter file. Black Envelope No. 2, 9 May 1928.
- 19 Although Katherine Cawsey does not mention it in her Kerr Brothers' books, the three years (1928-30) spent in boarding school—Osborne College in the Blue Mountains—had a permanent and negative effect on the psychological health, nervous disposition, confidence and future career possibilities of the Kerr children. See Archive Box 28 for a written account by Katherine Cawsey of her time at Osborne College. Obtainable through the National Library of Australia's Trove Collection, there is also an oral history—a sixty-five minute *Interview with Muriel Boggs (sic), Katherine Cawsey and Graham Kerr by Maryanne Quinn 1985*—described as a 'group interview with three ex-students of Osborne College'. The college was famous for its 'naval' traditions where its headmistress Miss Violet Gibbons cruelly instilled (or tried to instil) in the pupils 'a patriotic passion for Britain and the British Navy' and where 'naval jargon procedure and tradition permeated all aspects of school life' ('Osborne Ladies College, Blackheath', John Low, Local Studies Librarian, Blue Mountains City Library). Katherine's account and the oral history describe the punishments children received while at Osborne, the mistreatment of Len who was never offered an

- education there at all, and the fact that, for fear of what the headmistress would do to them, they were not allowed to talk outside the school about what happened at school—until Len (when aged 7) finally broke down. I mention this because five children being sent to boarding school so that Graham Kerr, accompanied by his wife, could follow his New Hebrides' ambitions in France, while understandable, also seems to be relevant to what I believe are part of the somewhat autocratic or perhaps self-centred aspects of Graham Kerr's role with his family throughout the Kerr Brothers story (editor).
- 20 Power of Attorney document is to be found in White Envelope No. 11.
 - 21 All necessary steps had been taken on 16 June with the firm's solicitors Perkins, Stevenson to make sure that the sale of Hog Harbour and East Santo Properties could be carried through to the proposed new firm of Kerr Bros. when the old one set up in 1909 was liquidated. Perkins did not think it mattered whether the new company acquiring the Hog Harbour and East Santo properties was registered in N.S.W. or New Hebrides It was not the place where a company was registered, but the place where it carried on business that determined its liability to taxation. All documents regarding the liquidation of Kerr Bros Ltd 1909–1928 are in Yellow Folder No. 4, Archive Box 20.
 - 22 For correspondence of W.T. Robertson (Robbie) see Green Folder No. 1, Archive Box 23.
 - 23 Santo experienced a very severe hurricane on 8 Feb 1928. On 15 Feb Robbie wrote to Kerr Bros. that while the plantation itself did not suffer bad damage both the launch and a boat had been destroyed. Also *Makambo* carrying on its deck a much-needed truck for Hog Harbour plantation notified it was lost overboard in the storm. 'The effects of the hurricane have been felt by everyone north of Canal Segond, *Lunawanna* is ashore. Coulon has lost his ship. Naturel's ship was lost in the Canal with eleven boys'.
 - 24 *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté*, of which company Taponier was Director, had bought the Vila properties sold by Kerr Bros to CGFH.
 - 25 Wallace and Coursin both thought the Power of Attorney was still valid. It was CGFH in Paris—for its own reasons—that considered that it had expired. See letter Wallace to Kerr Bros 1, Feb 1929. See Wallace letters in White Envelope No. 11.
 - 26 Although my father's adversaries refused to acknowledge any other contract than the 28 August one, they certainly knew that the 11 October one cancelled the contract. See Folder 10. *Tribunal Supérieur d'Appel de Noumea. Memoire Ampliatif*. M. Coursin in defence of Kerr Brothers, 29 March 1939, Xerox from 71 APC SFNH, Serie 11, obtained by me from the French archives in Paris and given in rough translation.
 - 27 See Wallace's letters in White Envelope 11. Included here are land claim documents concerning Makapai.
 - 28 From a letter Wallace to Kerr 1 Feb 1929 re Makapai: 'It was a slip on the part of the Registrar which misled M. Coursin. He expressed himself satisfied, and is to draw up a note to put in the file to the effect that Makapai was included in the transfer in error'
 - 29 'This despite the fact that Kerr, when he offered the option on 9 Feb 1927, directly specified that the 'Group holding the option ... must settle all claims which might eventually be raised by a third party on these properties before the land-claims [part of] the Joint Court'. Also these pieces of land were not included in the original offer of 9 Feb 1927.
 - 30 F.E. Wallace to Messrs Kerr Bros Ltd 15 Dec 1928. See White Envelope No. 11.
 - 31 The Kerrs were advised by Wallace on 1 Feb 1929 'there is no need to register the Conveyance Kerr Bros to the East Santo Plantations Ltd; an original of that must be lodged in the Court with your Claim to the plantation, and the Applicant's name changed from Kerr Bros to the East Santo Plantations Ltd.; so will you please send me an original by next mail'.
 - 32 For a copy of the 28 Aug 1928 agreement obtained from the Land Records Office, Vila. See Yellow Folder 1. Document No. 12, No. 42, Vaté. Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu Land-claim papers. Superseded by another one at the British Residency, signed by Wallace for my father and Audoin for CGFH. This vital act of conveyance, only after which the money owing was paid over, was never referred to in French records, it being one of the documents suppressed in Paris by SFNH.
 - 33 In fact it was said in the New Hebrides that when a settler wanted to stress the bona fides of a business deal, he cinched it with 'on the word of Mr Kerr'.
 - 34 The new company, Kerr Brothers Ltd was legally registered in Sydney by W.B. Meehan, Assistant Registrar of Joint Stock Companies. For documents re the liquidation of the Kerr Bros. Ltd 1909-1928 see Yellow Folder No 4.
 - 35 See Yellow Folder No. 9. History of the Vysuck estate arranged in chronological order.
 - 36 For all the material referred to here see Yellow Folder No. 9, History of the Vysuck Estate.
 - 37 See *Fiji Times* 20 Jan 1928. Big Blaze at Vila. Business Premises Destroyed. Heavy Loss of Life. This and following *Fiji Times* articles may be in Archive Box 30 in newspaper cuttings files.
 - 38 *Fiji Times* 23 March 1928. Heavy Damage by New Hebrides Hurricane. Worst of Recent Years.
 - 39 *Fiji Times* 5 March 1928. New Hebrides Islands. The Government Criticised. Address by Missionary.
 - 40 Shurcliff, Sidney Nichols, *Jungle Islands: the "Illyria" in the South Seas*. N.Y. Putnam, 1930. For the quotations cited from this book see pp. 153-4, 158, 161-5.

- 41 Before a time-expired labourer was repatriated he was paid the money owed to him and the plantation store was opened where he usually spent most of it on things to put in his 'bokkis' (box) of which the store also had a supply. Money, as such, meant little to them.
- 42 See *Fiji Times* 18 May 1928, Better Ships. To Call at Suva in the Next Year. *Messageries Maritimes*.
- 43 See *Fiji Times* 21 May 1928. New Caledonia. French Governor in Suva. Delighted with Visit.
- 44 For this translation of the French article see *Fiji Times* 19 May 1928. The Labour Market. Use of Javanese.
- 45 See *Fiji Times* 10 July 1928. New Hebrides. The French Attitude (from *Sydney Daily Guardian*).



Chapter 11 1929: The Calm Before the Storm



Photo 34: Visit to Sydney (1928–29) of Flora Nicol (née Kerr) and her family from Tanna in New Hebrides and Charlie Taylor (Margaret Taylor's son) from New Zealand—probably taken at Church Point, Pittwater. Back row from the left: Rachel (Ray) Nicol, Jimmy Nicol (but possibly Hugh Kerr), Muriel Kerr, Jane Kerr (married to D.H. Kerr), Joyce Kerr, Graham Kerr, Charlie Taylor, Flora Nicol; children in front row from the left: Len Kerr, Katherine Kerr, Jimmie Nicol, Margaret Kerr.

Graham Kerr had one of his periodic attacks of malaria early in January, but could not afford to be sick for long as the new Kerr Bros. Ltd and its New Hebridean subsidiary East Santo Plantations had to be running properly before he left for Paris in March.

W.T. Robertson arrived in Sydney in February to consult with Kerr Bros. about another truck for Hog Harbour plantation returning to Santo in early March.

Meantime in Paris there was a meeting of the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. Present were President M. Merlin, Messrs Aupied and Joyer, *E. Raoul-Duval et Cie*; Commandant Renault and Charles Revel. Absent was the other Board Member, G.L.S. Kerr, who had not yet left Australia but who would have been very outspoken if he had been there as what took place was no part of the agreement he had signed on 9 February 1927.

The tree count authorised by Commandant Audoin, Sea Captain on the Retired List, representative of the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* on Santo and the Statute drawn up to legalise it at Vila on 6 April 1928 was discussed. Audoin had wanted the French Bailiff at Vila to be in charge of the inventory but the French Resident Commissioner would not release him. So in the presence of the Deputy

French Resident on Santo and in the absence of D.H. Kerr it had been carried out and Audoin's final figures definitively adopted.¹

On 1 March, attempting to clear up another long outstanding matter Graham Kerr wrote to George Joy the British Resident Commissioner about Annie Petersen's Vysuck Estate. He had seen E.G. Seagoe in 1927 at the British Offices in an effort to get it settled. He had proposed that Annie Petersen should be paid 268 pounds plus interest from 1 January 1909. He now told Joy that Miss Petersen was dependent on a small annual income and would appreciate settlement by the British Government for her property in Vila, which had been occupied by the Government for the past 20 years, accepted at a price agreed upon. He pointed out that there had been no deed of transfer of any kind for any part of the property although the Post Office and Treasury are on part of it. He was on his way to Europe before Joy's reply arrived.²

Another letter he missed was one from Fernand Largeau in Paris dated 12 March, announcing the visit at the end of April of M. Corbin de Mangoux to New Hebrides to inquire into French holdings there and their possible amalgamation.

This was followed on 25 March by a letter from the Deputy Director *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in Paris also recommending to him Corbin de Mangoux who had been charged by the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* and other financial establishments as well as the various French plantation companies to make a study of the New Hebrides. His object was to set out precisely the situation of the companies and to coordinate their efforts with a view to obtaining the maximum profit from each of them. He told Kerr that he had not lost sight of his letter of 11 October 1927 regarding an amalgamation of the New Hebridean companies:

Your wish, it appears to me, is about to be realised and I would be personally obliged to you to give M. Corbin de Mangoux all the information you consider useful.³

Much to his disappointment, Graham Kerr would be in Europe during this important visit and would not catch up with Corbin de Mangoux until March in 1930 when his report was published. (The report is the subject of Appendix 3.)

Graham and Muriel Kerr arrived in Marseilles on board *Céphée* on 8 May and continued on to Paris by rail next day. A courtesy call at *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* head office was paid next day, where Graham Kerr saw Fernand Largeau. André Joyer was on holiday.⁴

After visiting Frédéric My and his wife and getting Muriel settled in an apartment, Kerr decided that a visit to Le Havre to see the Raoul-Duval brothers about *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* matters would be a good idea:



Photo 35: Muriel Kerr wrote on the reverse side of the photo: 'taken on our last trip to see children before leaving for Europe March 1929'. The author (Katherine) wrote: 'All pupils at Osborne College Blackheath N.S.W. Left to right Katherine 11 years 5 months, Muriel almost 13, Joyce 15 years 10 months, Margaret 8 years 6 months; in front Len 6 years 9 months.' Their parents would be away for over a year (ed.)

One of the brothers is Vice President [of the company] and of course they know fully what is going on. I got important information from them. At the present time they are

trying to find a basis to bring all the Societies operating in the New Hebrides under one administration. This is what I advised them to do long ago. The *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* and other banks are concerned in the negotiations.

At the present time the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* has an inspector in New Hebrides to report on the condition of the various properties. He would have called at our office in Sydney⁵. I am going to write a report for meeting of the *Conseil* ... which is to be held on 22 [May] and the Messrs Raoul-Duval will have it put into French for me.⁶

He taken for a drive in a motor car by one of the brothers and then went to his home for *dejeuner*. He was very glad he had made the visit. Back to Paris and very busy for the next few days writing his report which he sent off to Le Havre for translation on 17 May. Next day he had a meeting with Largeau and Renault. The rest of the time until the meeting on 22 May was spent showing Muriel the 'delights' of Paris and catching up with Fred My and his family.

At the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* meeting amalgamation of companies was discussed and Graham Kerr brought up the question of *Messageries Maritimes* being asked to provide a steam service connecting Indo-China with New Hebrides. 'As the *Conseil* have not had my report before them until today, a special meeting is to be held on 7 June to go into it.' He visited *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* head office several times before 7 June and was given information about what had been going on by Joyer and Largeau who are 'quite frank'.

On 27 May he bought a map of the world 'so as to demonstrate to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* the advantage of a service from France to New Hebrides via Saigon'. He had a long interview with Joyer and Largeau on 28 May and next day visited head office and suggested that Auguste Douyère should replace Vibert in the New Hebrides.⁷ At the same time he was also writing a further report on the situation in the Hebrides to be sent off to Raoul-Duval for translation.

On 7 June he attended the special *Conseil* meeting to consider his report. 'All the members agree with me as to the moving of Vibert ... They asked me to write a further report on my views for the running of the combined Societies', not just *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. He now knew that Corbin de Mangoux was in the New Hebrides on the job. Charles Revel was on a committee studying the amalgamation question and 'would like my report'. There was to be a further meeting of the *Conseil* on 25 June.

Messrs Raoul-Duval had been asked to study Graham Kerr's report and part of their conclusion was that Vibert had not risen to the responsibilities of his job either from an agricultural point of view or from that of being a director. His repeated absences seemed to demonstrate his lack of attachment to the interest with which he had been charged and there should be a replacement with the briefest delay.⁸ When Corbin de Mangoux reported back later in 1929 further conclusions would be drawn.

On 17 July, while visiting Scotland, Graham Kerr wrote to Emile My who was now at Shark Bay Santo with his son Jean.⁹ He told him he had missed him very much in Paris, which did not seem the same place without him. He wondered if My had seen Corbin de Mangoux whose visit he hoped would prove useful and told My there was talk of amalgamation of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*. Regarding Vibert he wrote:

He seems to spend most of his time travelling around at the Company's expense, Noumea, and Norfolk Island and anywhere but Turtle Bay. Plantations cannot be built up like that.

He told My that direction of the whole concern should be local:

They must ... have very full powers as you cannot make anything like detailed administration from Paris... [even if General Administration came from there] ... he was pushing for a regular M.M. service connecting New Hebrides with Saigon ... My idea is for the M.M. service to run from Marseilles to New Hebrides via Saigon, instead of via Panama—a shorter distance and more important connections. If the Panama run cannot be cut out, I am suggesting alternate service via Saigon and Panama—the boats going via

Saigon, returning via Panama and those going via Panama, returning via Saigon. That would give us a very necessary connection with Indo-China. Another matter I am pushing for is a Branch of the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* in New Hebrides to facilitate financial matters.

Everything rested on what Corbin de Mangoux found and Graham Kerr was hoping he would still be in Paris when his report came out.

Earlier, on 8 June he and Muriel were entertained by the Largeaus at their home and on 12 June he and Largeau

... went to call on Mr Aupied. Aupied is really the 'man behind the guns here', being well in with the French Ministry. I learnt quite a lot about the projects in view. Certainly I had a wrong impression of Aupied from before. I thought it was just a company-raising stunt with him, but I find he is something of an idealist and is pushing New Hebrides matters all the time. He is one of the largest shareholders in the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and has not sold a single share. He asked me to write my idea of a colonising plan for Santo and also ... for the best port for Santo.¹⁰

Graham Kerr was not well at this time probably with a bout of malaria but that did not prevent him from preparing a statement for Aupied. He also went to see Revel with the translations back from Raoul-Duval containing his ideas of amalgamation and other matters. He had also brought letters from Australia for the French Department of Foreign Trade and keeping all options open to do business he called on the Australian Commercial Agent for Paris.

He and Muriel then left for England and Scotland on 19 June. My mother was due to produce a child, to be the youngest member of our family in mid July and my father was anxious that the baby be born at Bridge-of-Allan near Stirling, the birth place of his own father. Meantime he bought a second-hand Wolseley so he could show Muriel the sights in comfort. Nancy (Agnes MacDonald Stirling Kerr) was



Photo 36: Holmhurst, Westerton Drive, Bridge-of-Allan (1904). Graham Kerr's parents James Walter Kerr Sr. and Flora Jane Kerr (née Macleod) in the car. Their daughter Mary Isabella Kerr is standing next to her mother. The other women in the photo may be James Kerr's three sisters who lived together at Holmhurst. Flora Jane Kerr died on this trip to Scotland.

born on 26 July and with a nurse to look after Nancy they made a leisurely tour of much of northern Scotland including Assynt, home of Graham's mother's Macleod family. They left in the car for London on his 56th birthday on 21 September. In London they made acquaintance with some of Muriel's English relations, engaging an English nanny for Nancy.

On 11 November the holiday was over, and having arranged to send the car home to Sydney, my parents left London for Paris via Tilbury and Dunkerque. In Paris Graham

Kerr then hunted round for an apartment and a girl to help with Nancy. They found an apartment in the *Rue de Vaugiraud* and Mlle. Deleau to help Muriel. She also came in handy to translate a letter for André Joyer and Charles Aupied. It was eventually decided that the Nanny they had in London, Miss Gordon, was more suitable and it was arranged that she come to Paris.



Photo 37: Drumpark Nursing Home, Bridge-of-Allan where Agnes MacDonald Stirling Kerr (Nancy) was born on 26 July 1929. Photo provided by Liane Shearer, Nancy's daughter, in June 2018.

Graham Kerr was not deeply engaged in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* business at this time but he did meet Messrs Jules Leconte and Imbault on 20 December.¹¹ The year ended with the Hogmanay Dance at the Caledonian Society in Paris, a 'very pleasant evening' he wrote.

Strangely there is no mention in his diary of the American bank crash which took place in New York on 27 October 1929 while they were in London. Perhaps it took longer to make its presence felt in England but that was not the case in France. It may also help to explain the change of attitude towards Graham Kerr by certain members of the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* as the effect of the bank crash deepened and the whole world began to experience the Great Depression of the 1930s.



Photo 38: Taken at Drumpark Nursing Home August 1929. Written on the back of the photo is 'With much love and kisses to my sisters and brother from Nancy Stirling'. Photo provided by Liane Shearer, Nancy's daughter, in June 2018.

In New Hebrides, to put things in perspective, I will quote a few figures about the relative British and French population of New Hebrides in 1929. The total foreign population was 1104. Of those 797 were French nationals with 49 foreign settlers who had opted for French law and there were 205 British subjects with 53 foreigners under British law.¹²

Although France looked to be winning the battle for the New Hebrides, a different picture was emerging in France. At the end of 1928 the current French government had been involved in a big financial scandal in which seven members including Raymond Poincaré and Aristide Briand were involved. It looked as if Poincaré would have to resign but he received a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies on 12 January 1929.¹³

Far away from the centre of things in Europe an article appeared in the *Fiji Times* 18 April 1929:

The New Hebrides. Predominance of French The British Outnumbered. The French in the New Hebrides

now outnumber the British by three to one ... particularly in the northern group of the islands, more and more British plantations ... being sold to French interests.



Photo 39: Touring Scotland with Nancy's nurse: nurse holding baby Nancy; Graham and maybe a family friend or relative as the woman does not look like Muriel Kerr. Written on the back of the photo is 'Photo taken at Trossachs close to Loch Katrine'. (The photo, included because relevant to the book, is blurred ed.) Photo provided by Liane Shearer, Nancy's daughter, in June 2018.

The author of the article, Charles Eedy of Tanna, wrote that

... while British and French officials were working together in perfect amity under the condominium rule, French interests were becoming predominant.

What he did not say, or probably realise, was that England, in despair of a situation she regarded as hopeless, was gradually handing over her Condominium responsibilities, as far as possible, to Australian interests, and appointing officials, such as George Joy who had no immediate Pacific experience and thus no local sympathies, as Resident Commissioner. Merton King, British Resident for 17 years, and Smith-Rewse, with many years experience in the Western Pacific before his untimely death in August 1927, had wanted E.G. Seago to be given the post of at least Deputy Commissioner. Seago had been in the Group since early in the century and was the nephew and assistant of the First Resident Commissioner, Captain E.G. Rason.

On 17 May Sir Eyre Hutson, who with Smith-Rewse had tried so hard and unsuccessfully to get outside labour for British planters in the New Hebrides in 1927, was replaced by Sir Arthur Fletcher whose previous experience lay in Ceylon and Hong Kong.

By turning to Australia, the Colonial Office was just delivering another blow to British interests in the Group. The White Australia Policy would never relax enough to help British nationals who earned their living in a territory which seemed not to belong to anybody neither to Britain, nor to France: not even to its own Indigenous people who happened to be the wrong colour.

With France it was different. When *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* was set up so successfully in Paris in 1924 to sell *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* property in New Hebrides to Paris shareholders, its very success led to a rash of other French companies for the same purpose.

There was, of course, the risk that the necessary finance for expansion might dry up and no thought seemed to be given in Paris to the fact that many of these *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* claims were doubtful and would have to be fought in the Joint Court in Vila. New Hebrides was not a French colony but had the fact really sunk in?

On 27 July 1929, Poincaré, the French Premier, resigned with his Cabinet and Briand formed a new one. There were many warring political parties in France; Radicals, Communists and those to the Far Right amongst them, and each new Cabinet always seemed to include some members of the previously-ousted one.

The *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and other French real estate companies like *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* which received strong financial support from the French government through the Ministry for Colonies would not have been immune from these government upsets. As it was, shareholders in Paris, many of them members of Parliament and holders of the Legion of Honour, who had been talked into investing their money, were beginning to wonder why they were receiving no dividends and questioning the large sums of money, supposedly spent on 'administrative costs'. Amongst them was Graham Kerr, not only a large shareholder, but in the unique position of being a British subject.

On 3 September, six months after Edgar Hoover was inaugurated as President of USA, the stock market reached its all-time high.

In Australia on 12 October S.M. Bruce's Liberal Government was defeated by Labour, 46 seats to 26 for all other parties. Mr Scullin was the New Prime Minister but this would not make any difference to the White Australia Policy which weighed heavily against the New Hebrides and on the British Protectorate of the Solomons. A correspondent from Australia wrote:

Presuming it to be correct that Australia does object to the admission of indentured labour into the British possessions in the Pacific, we may assume that among the reasons would be ...the possibility of an influx of Asiatics into Australia through the Islands and the Northern Territory.¹⁴

But the New Hebrides was not a protectorate but a joint government of two powers one of which. France, had no such objection.

Then suddenly the World Situation changed. On Tuesday 22 October 1929, which became known as Black Tuesday, the situation on the Wall Street Stock Exchange altered catastrophically:

A dramatic shift of trading patterns took place as six million shares changed hands. For every sell order there was a buyer but the drop in prices was disastrous ... After a heady five year climb the market plunged backwards into an abyss ... Prices became impossible to quote—the stock-trading system collapsed into chaos...

A consortium of bankers led by J. P. Morgan, injected a modicum of hope by ... buying up large blocks of stock; the market steadied temporarily ... By 29 October investors were fighting to sell... but not even bargain hunters were buying. The market hit rock bottom on 13 November 1929.¹⁵

In France on 22 October M. Briand the French Prime Minister resigned, M. Tardieu temporarily taking his place and on 29 October M. Daladier formed a new Ministry in which Briand became Minister for Foreign Affairs [the source of this information about Daladier, who was not Prime Minister at the time, is not known ed.] This would be the third Ministry since the beginning of the year; foreign policy was the bone of contention.

There was a six hour difference in time between New York and Paris:

The sluggish Paris Bourse had never achieved the scale of U.S. investment activity: French issues were affected only psychologically and superficially, but many French men of means had succumbed to the American fever and invested in Wall St. as well.¹⁶

I feel that William Wiser, who wrote this, down-played the psychological effect the crash had on the French mind. After the First World War France, which had experienced German invasion of its own soil, was very unstable and its currency much devalued. The United States of America, on the other hand, had emerged as the world power with a very strong currency.

When Graham Kerr paid his first visit to Paris in 1926, he referred to that exciting city as 'my Paris' but he was not the only one. It was the Place to be. Many young Americans realised that their dollars would translate into a sizeable sum of francs making the good life in France a real possibility and they invaded Paris in droves. After the Wall Street Crash many of these expatriates were no longer solvent and had to return home. 'The smaller-scale French economy had not shared in the American boom except obliquely through the hordes of tourists in Paris.'

This may not seem to have affected Graham Kerr and his dealings with France but financing of the various companies which had mushroomed in Paris to take over New Hebridean real-estate depended on a healthy Share Market. The Wall Street Crash would certainly have raised fears.



Photo 40: The author writes 'probably at Hugh Kerr's place at Hornsby circa 1935'. The date is likely to be wrong and more like 1929 (ed). Many of the people in this photo on the tennis court are unknown, but it is a rare photograph of Annie Petersen who lived with Jane and Hugh Kerr. Back row: three unknown people, Hugh Kerr, Annie Petersen and Jane Kerr. Katherine Kerr is kneeling and in front of Hugh Kerr. Muriel (Gem) Kerr sits cross-legged and is wearing a hat in the front row.

Endnotes

- 1 Found in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris in 1983. 71 APC. *SFNH Serie II, No 29. Administrateurs*—Kerr. See Paris Notebook 1, pp. 59–61. For rough trans., see Red Ledger, pp. 45–46.
- 2 On 15 April Joy acknowledged my fathers' letter. He hoped for an early decision. He anticipated that 'the Joint Court will deal with the title in a few months. The balance of the purchase money plus interest at 5% was inserted in the British estimates for 1929.' But the matter would not be settled in 1929. It was a matter that needed to be settled between the British and French Governments and the SFNH.
- 3 See G.L.S. Kerr's 1929 diary.
- 4 In a letter to his sisters in Sydney at this time my father told them of the company amalgamation which he had suggested long ago. 'Of course they can still waste money, but they won't have so many idiots wasting it for them.' He hoped that Corbin de Mangoux was not the same type of person as Audoin and Renault. 'Largeau says they are quite full of Vibert, but I suppose they won't kick him out until they have the report of the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* man ... It seems Aupied has been working hard to reconcile the different interests of the various companies ... with the banks, principally with the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* ... The French government are active in the thing but ... Aupied has a hard job to nail them down. They promise all sorts verbally, but the banks want things in black and white.'
- 5 This was Corbin de Mangoux, mentioned earlier in the chapter. The news of his visit arrived after my father had left for France.
- 6 In connection with this trip Kerr wrote to Louis Vautier at Kerr Bros Sydney office on 15 May 1929 regarding the Raoul-Duval brothers. 'The two brothers speak English perfectly so that made it easy for me. As a matter of fact they are half Scotch.'
- 7 Augustin Douyère 1887—born in New Caledonia, one of 5 sons of Léopold Douyère who came there from the French island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean. Augustin arrived in New Hebrides circa 1904. He was first a copra maker on Ambrym and then settled on Aore Island, south of Santo on land granted him by the SFNH. See *Hébridais* p. 58 for short biography.
- 8 French National Archives *Outre Mer*. 71 APC CGFH, No.13 and 71 APC Serie 2. *SFNH* Nos. 116–117 *Affaire Kerr*. See Paris Notebooks 1-3.
- 9 See Black Envelope No. 2 Corres. Emile My and G.L.S. Kerr 1927-1929.
- 10 See G.S. L. Kerr's 1929 Diary. It would not be long into the future that my father would return to his first opinion of Aupied. He was the idealist, not Aupied, and sadly lacking that modicum of scepticism that is necessary in looking at one's own actions as well as those of one's fellows. Undoubtedly Aupied, for his own purposes, was buttering him up and after the unfriendly treatment my father had earlier experienced when his honesty was doubted, his normally trusting reactions were understandable.
- 11 See G.L.S. Kerr's 1929 Diary. Re Leconte, Jules 1876-. In April 1908 he settled at Téouma, Efate, on a land grant from SFNH. In 1925 he was part of a committee dealing with French interests in the New Hebrides. At this time he had left the Group and now lived in France. See *Hébridais* pp. 126-7.
- 12 See White Envelope No. 4 Corbin de Mangoux, *Etude sur les Sociétés aux Nouvelles-Hébrides*. Pt 1, p. 49.
- 13 As reported in *Fiji Times* 3 Jan, 8 Jan and 14 Jan 1929. It seemed that Mme Hanau who was involved in the case had had dealings with two ex. Prime Ministers, as well as Deputies and Senators. To arm or disarm was proving a difficult problem for England, France and Italy to decide and much bad feeling resulted between them.
- 14 See *Fiji Times* 5 Sept 1929. Australia and the Islands. (From a Solomon Island correspondent.)
- 15 Quoted from Wiser, William H., *The Crazy Years: Paris in the Twenties*, N.Y. Atheneum, 1983, p. 228-229.
- 16 Wiser, see previous endnote

Chapter 12 1930: The Bank Crash and the developing worldwide Depression slowly reveal themselves

Graham Kerr's 1930 diary did not reveal much evidence of the 1929 Bank Crash. During the short time he remained in France before returning to Australia there were many amicable meetings with members of the *Conseil Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and also with erstwhile French New Hebridean and New Caledonian settlers now resident in France. Among these were Leconte and Fernand Largeau who with his wife entertained Muriel and Graham in his home, which hospitality was gracefully reciprocated. On 3 January Largeau helped Kerr make a new arrangement with *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* to hold the Kerr family shares in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. Lacking fluent French, it was helpful to be able to rely on good friends.



Photo 41: Summer 1929/1930 Dancing at Osborne. Left to right as each appear in the photo, regardless of whether they are in the background: Pat Beckett, Adele Murray-Prior, Joan Beckett, Joyce Kerr, Gloria Primrose, Betty Horley, Katherine Kerr (information Lindsay Benaud as given her by the author).

On 21 January there was a meeting of Presidents, and Deputy Administrators of the various companies at 11 Bis, Rue Scribe which Graham Kerr attended. This was the headquarters of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. In his diary he wrote 'I have them moving a bit now'.

On 5 February he received Corbin de Mangoux's report on *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* to study.¹ This was not the complete report



Photo 42: Muriel Kerr with Nancy in Paris on 14 January 1930. Written on back of photo is 'In a small garden near Des Invalides Napoleon's Tomb'. Photo provided by Liane Shearer, Nancy's daughter, in June 2018.

On 3 March he went to see Charles Aupied with Largeau and on 6 March he saw the Director of *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* (BIC) and met Corbin de Mangoux for the first time. He also had a long talk with André Joyer about *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* affairs and met Raoul-Duval on 14 March so he was not being ignored. He also had discussions with *Messageries Maritimes*. But in the background resentment about Vibert continued and on 11 March he received a letter from D.H. Kerr in Sydney in answer to two he had sent on 29 January and 5 February. It seems that Vibert had been complaining that *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* had not had all the produce it was entitled to when it took over Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu. D.H. Kerr wrote:



Photo 43: Tiby Hagen and Mr Corbin de Mangoux (president of the *Compagnie Cotonnière des Nouvelles Hébrides*) on board *Kobiloko*, 1929, from 'The New Hebrides: Postal History & Stamps' on the web at <http://www.ro-klinger.de/NH/1-ph1925b.html> source Frederic Petit.

but echoed Kerr's sentiments exactly and more importantly was made by a person who knew his subject.

Accompanied by Nicolas Hagen, always known as Tiby Hagen, Corbin de Mangoux had been sent on a tour of enquiry to the New Hebrides by the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine*, a major shareholder to the tune of 7 million francs in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and like Graham Kerr worried that no yearly balance sheets of expenditure were being presented to the shareholders.² In the future when Graham Kerr would be chosen as a British scapegoat to account for French gross mismanagement in the New Hebrides he would cite Corbin de Mangoux's report as a major plank in his defence.

At this time, in all good faith, he was getting much translation done by professional translators. I feel that many of the misunderstandings and tensions he encountered could have been obviated by face to face conversation but that was not possible. Not able to state his point of view or make the necessary strong statements in a language foreign to him placed him in a very dangerous situation and wide open to deliberate misinterpretation.³

Regarding *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and Vibert. If they do not know the character of this man by this time they are quite hopeless. Apparently they want someone to put the blame on for the mess they have made. You may as well try and argue with a bushranger as with Vibert.⁴

On 20 March the Kerr family left for Marseilles to catch the *Céphée* for the long trip home. They were farewelled by Joyer, the Largeaus, and Emile My's Paris family amongst others.

The Annie Petersen Vysuck estate case was still not settled and on 24 March F.E. Wallace wrote to Kerr Bros. Ltd Sydney office on the matter.⁵ The British Resident George Joy had suggested to the Colonial Office

... that the Imperial Government ... become applicants for Title in your place and he (Joyer) will accept the proposed settlement ... Should his suggestion be rejected then we must go on with the case.

From the very beginning it had been a matter to be fought out between the British and French Condominium Government but the Colonial Office had refused to see it that way. Annie Petersen's attorneys, the Kerrs, had to prove before the Joint Court Annie Petersen's right to the rest of the estate as against *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and the French Government before the Colonial Office would pay for this disputed section, while Condominium buildings—the Post Office and Treasury—already occupied the undisputed part. 'This is a survey question and the Court should get a report from the Court Surveyor (Larney) on the original transfer.'

Wallace hoped that the Colonial Office would accept Joy's suggestion otherwise he 'saw a lot of trouble ahead for us whatever the result of the case'. Wallace, on vacation in Tasmania, hoped to see Kerr before he returned to Vila but in the event it did not happen as their ship timetables did not coincide.

On 21 April from Fremantle, Graham Kerr wrote to his sister Agnes in Sydney:

If the British Government do not conclude our offer before it goes to hearing ... of course the offer lapses and we proceed apart from them entirely. We shall make an arrangement with the French Government if we think advisable. How is the British Government going to get a title to just part of the Petersen property. They cannot just pick out what they like.⁶

On 6 June he wrote to Wallace saying that it was extraordinary for Miss Petersen

... to be involved obtaining a title to land sold to the British Government 20 years ago.⁷ Her only concern is the money still owed to her. How can the British government justify themselves? No title could be guaranteed at the time the land was sold to them—this applying to every land transaction there. How can they pick out parts of the property and occupy them and leave the balance for Miss Petersen to establish title to? Either they bought the property or they did not ... This miserable corner now in dispute with the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and French government has no real value ... Miss Petersen is only interested in getting her money. She has not the money to contest the case in the Joint Court and is urgently in need of the money owed to her for so many years.

Agreeing with everything that Kerr had written, Wallace wrote back on 20 June: 'I am sorry to have to report the British government adheres to its attitude to wait until Title is granted before doing anything.'⁸ He had been sure that the suggestion of the Resident Commissioner, George Joy, would be accepted. He could not understand their attitude. The Western Pacific High Commission had agreed, but the Colonial Office in London had not:

The real question at issue is what land did the Vila natives sell to Donald Macleod, which he in 1890 sold to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. Did it include any of the Petersen property?

A survey was to be done by the official Surveyor and Wallace was 'pretty certain that [it] will result in a report favourable to us'. He ended his letter telling Kerr that as soon as the case was finished he could no longer act for Miss Petersen as he had a general retainer for the British Government. Did that mean that being employed by the Colonial Office he could no longer take part in a case that was actu-



Photo 44: Graham, Muriel and Nancy on board *Céphée* in Mediterranean, March 1930: return trip to Australia from France. Photo provided by Liane Shearer, Nancy's daughter, in June 2018.

ally waged by the French Government via the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* against his own employer? For that is what it would be.

Miss Petersen was of Swedish, ni-Erakor stock but her guardians, the Kerrs, were British subjects. Was this just another example of the way in which more and more safeguards for British members of the Condominium were gradually being whittled away by allowing the French to have what they wanted to save further trouble: appeasement?

Originally, the Erakor natives who had granted Gus Petersen the land when he took up with a woman of their tribe proved that the two properties were completely separate and they provided the tribal boundary markings of the land they had given Gus Petersen to the complete satisfaction of Reverend Mackenzie of Erakor.⁹ The French surveyor, Jules Giraud, had also agreed but unfortunately not in a written statement. It was only when the French Residence was built on the property Macleod had sold to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*—a law unto itself—that they decided that they also wanted some of Annie Petersen's adjacent land. It was as simple as that and as usual the Colonial Office did not stand up to the unwarranted demands of their Condominium partner, preferring to let things lie—appeasement again.

Meantime in Paris Corbin de Mangoux's report and Graham Kerr's suggestion, were being acted on. On 15 July 1930, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* assigned the whole of its immovable property to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. This included Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations.¹⁰

Was this partly because the price of their main product, copra, was now going down? On 23 June Graham Kerr was consulting with D.H. Kerr about the low price they were getting from East Santo Plantations. It had been falling since the beginning of the year. By 8 August the London price was 17 pounds a ton, and Sydney slightly higher. *Fiji Times* reported that 'although prices have reached the lowest since 1908, it looks as though still lower prices will be seen.'¹¹ The price at Marseilles, where the Kerrs sold theirs, was also 17 pounds at this time and going down. By September Graham Kerr noted in his diary that the price for sun-dried copra had now reached 14 pounds 12 shillings and sixpence on the London market. This from 23 pounds and more the previous year—a serious position as it was only the sale of its products that made a plantation viable.

The world-wide depression that followed the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 was making itself felt.

Never one to be defeated, Graham Kerr now began to try and think of other ways to bring in cash. He arranged for some sacks of coconut fibre to be sent to Sydney from Hog harbour for experimental purposes. Would it be useful for paper making?

The final decision on the Annie Petersen case was delivered by the Joint Court on 24 October 1930.¹² Wallace notified my father on the same date. The Court had directed that Mr Larney, make a survey based on the original titles and as a result of his report Wallace had been 'pretty sure of winning'.

Gayon represented the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and Wallace, Annie Petersen. M. Coursin represented the French Government to whom the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had sold the land. Wallace wrote:

I am sorry to report that [judgement] was wholly in favour of the French government and the SFNH ... I am not cool enough to say much about the decision; it came as a shock to me, for not only do I think that it runs counter to the plain meaning of the words in the SFNH's original deed, but I know it is dead against the opinion of the Chief Surveyor of the Court.

In his reply on 6 November Graham Kerr queried why Wallace had not come to a compromise with the other claimants:

... you must have known that the dice was loaded ... The value of the disputed part is infinitesimal, but evidently the other side were determined to show how they can carry things through. In view of this glaring instance of distortion of justice, the British government can hardly take advantage of it or they make themselves a party to trickery. On no

account run Miss Petersen into any liabilities. She has not the money to undertake any, until she receives a settlement from the British government.¹³

Wallace's and Kerr's points of view are interesting. Wallace's outrage at the blatant miscarriage of justice and Kerr's view—arrived at from long experience—that the French always got what they wanted and the British Government let them get away with it so compromise was necessary. If the Condominium was a union of two equal partners Wallace was right in his stand, but Kerr knew it was not.

As for the Joint Court with its Spanish President there was always talk of bias. French and Spanish law were similar, British law different. It is understandable that Wallace would be glad when he could withdraw from representing Annie Petersen. It was an all out French versus British contest and he was now seeing from experience how unequal it was.

However he did not let Graham Kerr's protest go unanswered. On 21 November he sent him part of Robert Larney's report.¹⁴ The name Tacenack, as a boundary-mark between the two properties, had come up. He wrote it was

... not known to any native, but the boundary of the land purchased by Macleod was clearly set out, and, as Plaintiffs, they had to satisfy the Court that the boundary they claimed was justified by their deed.

Larney had consulted with three Vila native chiefs;

... [all three] well remember the transactions with Petersen, Macleod and Chevillard. In fact they were present at the times the sales were made, and subsequently went over the boundaries many times, with all three purchasers. The ground surrounding the Registrar's house, these natives aver, was never sold to or occupied by Macleod and they point out too, that the small house now forming the southern portion of the Registrar's house, was for a long time occupied by the Petersen family or the Kerrs who were the Petersen's attorneys. These natives pointed out to me various trees and marks which were the original marks of the land sold and also the ancient tribal boundary marks. From what has been pointed out to me I am convinced that Macleod never owned the land on which the Registrar's house is situated; neither did he own the land on the east of the Registrar's house, which was Erakor tribal land; it could never have been sold to him by Vila natives.

This is what the chiefs had told Reverend McKenzie back in the 1890s when Chevillard was fighting Macleod's heirs. If the Erakor natives could not be trusted to know their own tribal markings then who could? Certainly the French could not be trusted. Wallace commented: 'Could anyone foresee that the Court would totally ignore this report and give a decision dead in the teeth of it?'

All parties had to pay their own costs, and the French did not get quite all they wanted. Was this perhaps a sop to the vanquished? Wallace told Kerr he was 'preparing an account of the case to send to the High Commissioner and the Colonial Office to let them see how things are done here'. He, personally, was disgusted.

In Paris the French Cabinet again met defeat on 17 February 1930 and Tardieu once again in power, resigned. The new Premier was Camille Chautemps, but he too was not accepted by the Chamber of Deputies and Tardieu again took power:

A great wave of hostility greeted Mr Tardieu when he presented the new French government to the Chamber of Deputies.¹⁵

So the French Government consisting of many warring factions, some far-Right and some far-Left, was anything but stable. There was a Naval Conference taking place in London at this time to try and reduce fleet size for all naval powers. Italy wanted naval parity with France but France would not concede the point. France wanted a mutual security pact with Britain for material assistance in the event

of war but Britain was not willing to take on any more military commitments. The United States of America had reservations as to what it would commit itself to.

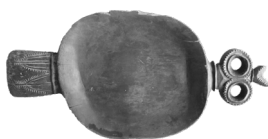
A strange heading appeared in *Fiji Times* 20 February 1930. 'New Hebrides. French Interests to Sell. Australia Considering'. Reverend Oscar Michelsen, New Hebrides Mission, when asked his opinion said

... it would probably be some of the larger plantations or combinations of planters that would be wanting to sell. They would not make such an offer unless it were to save themselves from serious losses. The price of copra has dropped and is affecting the copra growers throughout the islands.¹⁶

Perhaps the mismanagement of the many new French companies was behind this extraordinary rumour which added to the situation of uncertainty that was becoming worldwide.

At this time *Messageries Maritimes* had four ships sailing between Marseilles, Tahiti, New Caledonia via Suva; the *Andromede*, *Ville de Verdun*, *Ville de Strasbourg*, and *Antinous* so getting their products to the European market was not the problem. These were the ships that Graham Kerr was trying to have rerouted to take in Saigon.

He did not visit New Hebrides in 1930 but consolidated the business in Sydney instead. Much the markets for plantation products were slumping, but on the last day of the year he paid out a twelve and a half percent dividend to all the shareholders of East Santo Plantations, including his friend Emile My. Neither he, nor anyone else at that time, realised what was in store.



Endnotes

- 1 Mangoux was to be included in a Glossary of Names that was never written (ed).
- 2 This was Corbin de Mangoux's first trip to the New Hebrides and Tiby Hagen—in good with both Charles Aupied, Deputy Director of SFNH and Raoul-Duval, a member of its *Conseil* which was used by Tiby as French agent for *Compagnie des Etablissement Hagen's* (CEH's) island produce—was probably chosen to accompany him for these connections. CEH was not one of the six companies being inspected but was in the privileged position of having been granted the effective direction of one of them—*Compagnie Coloniale des Iles Banks* (CCIB)—which had a paid up capital of 2.500.000 francs. In Hagen's vessel, *Kobiloko*, CCIB's produce was collected and sent to Raoul-Duval at Le Havre in France. Tiby had earlier been granted by Charles Aupied the right to collect the produce of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu for which he paid the lowest price possible, getting a much better price from Raoul-Duval. As an associate of Audoin, who visited Kerrs' Sydney office in the company of Hagen, my father was always suspicious. Understandably as Audoin was 'setting him up' and Tiby Hagen had a reputation as an astute but not over-scrupulous business man. At this time CEH was one of the few successful French companies: but at whose expense? Recently I came across a somewhat surprising paragraph in Denyse-Anne Pentecost's book *L'Appel du Pacifique*. On p. 190, circa 1930, Edouard Pentecost, illegitimate son of Tiby Hagen went to Santo on board *Dupleix* travelling first class as representative of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CAMNH) and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* (CCV), both belonging to Tiby Hagen, she wrote. These two companies and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* (CGFH) had depleted treasuries and were the worst-run of the six limited-liability companies which Corbin de Mangoux was inspecting on behalf of their Paris shareholders. What was going on? Was CEH also buying up their products for peanuts like those of CGFH? In 1929 Corbin de Mangoux had no suspicions but only praise for CEH and its management.
- 3 My father could understand what was being said but replying in fluent forceful French was impossible for him. In the New Hebrides French and English settlers got on with 'Pigeon-English' and managed very well.
- 4 See White Envelope No. 7. Corres. file No. 3.
- 5 See Yellow Folder No. 9. History of the Vysuck Estate. Letters 1904-1936 in chron. order. White Envelope No. 7. Corres. File No. 3 letter D.H. Kerr to G.L.S. Kerr re Wallace's letter.
- 6 See Black Quill (sic) File. p. 11. [I am unable to find this file in Archive Index (ed.)]
- 7 See Yellow Folder No. 9 History of the Vysuck Estate.
- 8 See Yellow Folder No. 9. History of the Vysuck Estate.
- 9 To add a bizarre slant to this tale, after Macleod's death in 1894 Chevillard had first suggested that Macleod had stolen part of Annie Petersen's property and sold it to the SFNH in 1890. Then the accusation was altered. Now Annie Petersen's guardians—the Kerrs—had stolen some of the property sold to SFNH by Macleod. It was just a ploy to blacken the character of the dead Macleod and add to the difficulties of his young heirs.
- 10 See Yellow Folder No. 1. Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu Land-claim papers.
- 11 *Fiji Times* 8 Aug 1930. Copra Notes.
- 12 See Yellow Folder No. 9. History of the Vysuck Estate. Application No. 43. Efate. Wallace's letter is also here.
- 13 See Yellow folder No. 9. History of the Vysuck Estate.
- 14 See Yellow folder No. 9. History of the Vysuck Estate.
- 15 *Fiji Times* 7 March 1930, p. 2. French Politics.
- 16 *Fiji Times* 29 March 1930. New Hebrides. Sale of French Interests.

Chapter 13 1931: The Plot Thickens

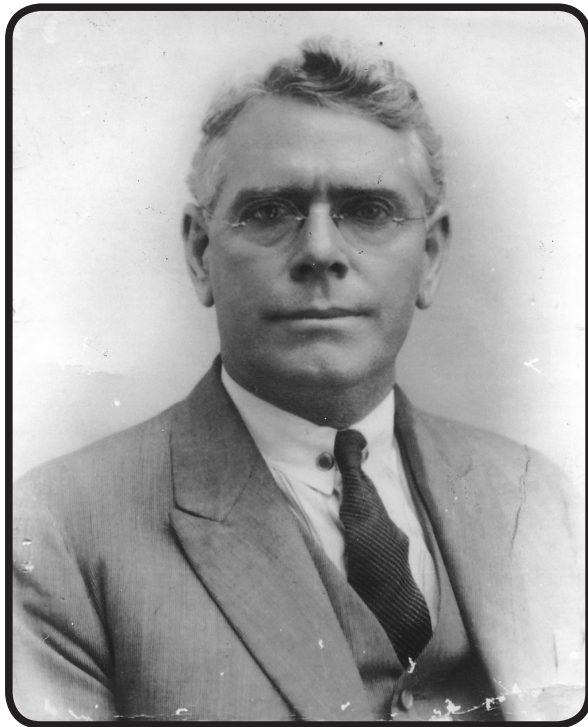


Photo 45: Graham Lennox Stirling Kerr taken late 1920s or early 1930s

The Depression started to bite. Copra sales were lagging badly and Graham Kerr in Sydney was making huge efforts to find markets for it and other plantation products, through business such as Smalls, Gartrell White Ltd, and Stedman-Henderson Sweets Ltd. He left a letter at Nestlé regarding cocoa on 17 January before attending a meeting of the Island Trade Committee of the Chamber of Commerce.

He maintained friendly contact with André Joyer in Paris who kept him up to date with what was taking place there since the amalgamation of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in July 1930.¹ My father had hoped that Joyer, co-Director with Charles Aupied of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, would be chosen as one of the directors of the expanded *Société*

Française des Nouvelles Hébrides but that was not the case. A person called Pinelli had been sent from Paris

to take over from Vibert and in a letter to Joyer on 8 January Graham Kerr wrote

... with such low prices for produce the position is difficult ... I saw Mr Pinelli on the way through. I hope he will be able to cut costs of production seriously. That is the most serious problem at present.

In his reply on 21 February Joyer agreed with Kerr and Corbin de Mangoux that the three companies needed drastic reorganisation to reduce the cost of production and that Santo was the only place it could be done.² With this in mind Joyer placed himself at the disposal of the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to go to Santo and with the aid of a person technically qualified in New Hebridean plantation management such as Graham Kerr, if he would accept the job, or Mr Largeau or another qualified person to put things to rights. He made two conditions, the first complete independence from interference and the second, the reduction to a maximum of 200,000 francs of annual general expenditure in Paris and the addition to the *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* of a person completely qualified in plantation running; in particular New Hebridean plantations.

Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides accepted the first condition and told Joyer to be ready to leave for Sydney on 18 August 1930. However, while accepting the second condition in principle, it gave no formal

assurance or guarantee of immediate action. But following the General Assembly of Shareholders of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on 5 August 1930 Mr Pinelli, who had raised objections to the amalgamation of the three companies, was selected by the *Conseil* for the job and Joyer withdrew his offer. He thought that '*nos amis du Havre*'—Raoul-Duval—felt disquiet at the situation but kept it to themselves.

When Kerr received the above news on 8 April he replied immediately that he was 'quite in the dark as to the why and wherefore of matters arranged'.³ It needs to be remembered that he was a member of the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and as such should have been told:

I was extremely astonished when I found your name did not appear. However I have not said one word against it as it would be thought we could do nothing but find fault... SFNH will find out their own errors. Monsieur Pinelli's reputation in New Caledonia is not of the kind to put him in charge of important affairs in New Hebrides. If the present SFNH allow themselves to be saddled with the methods of the old *Société Française*, it will not make for successful development in the New Hebrides. The cost of production must be cut down seriously ... otherwise the prospect is very poor. The prices of produce are very low and I am afraid we cannot look for much improvement in that direction. We must aim at pre-war costs of production with wise selection of produce and to find the best markets possible.⁴

On 13 April *Céphée* arrived in Sydney from France with the Caillard family on board. Edmond Caillard was Director of the well-run *Compagnie Cotonnière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* at Norsup, Malekula, which was independent of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* interference and praised by Corbin de Mangoux in his 1930 report. As usual Graham Kerr attended to their needs and on 20 April, accompanied by Caillard and Louis Vautier from Kerr Bros office, went out to the Australian Paper Company's mills at Botany to discuss the suitability of coconut fibre for paper making. Nothing must be left to chance in an effort to get new products and new markets.

Things were moving in Paris and perhaps Graham Kerr's opinion of Pinelli was being heeded for on 5 May *Ormonde* arrived in Sydney with Fernand Largeau on board to take over direction of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* affairs; something Kerr had suggested as far back as 1927. Pinelli arrived in Sydney from Noumea on *Laperouse* on his way back to France the same day and Kerr juggled the job of attending to both men at the same time. It was nothing but the best for Pinelli who was put up at the Hotel Australia, Sydney's best hotel during his stay in Sydney while Largeau opted for Petty's Hotel.

On 8 May Graham Kerr wrote to his sister Flora Nicol, wife of the Condominium District Agent on Tanna, J.M. Nicol, that there had been a run on the Government Savings Bank of New South Wales in April so they had had to suspend payment for some time.⁵ Flora wanted him to pay her income tax for her and he had the time extended:

We are all caught badly with the closing of the Bank, so are just sitting fairly tight. All Commonwealth Bond Holders are going to be asked to convert to a consolidating loan at a lower rate of interest. A recent conference of State Premiers with the Prime Minister agreed to reduce all salaries, interest etc, by 22 and a half % ... All countries seem to have big deficits and are all living on borrowed money with tremendous loads of debt hanging round their necks.

He thought the Government and the newspapers had started the panic:

The Bank was in a perfectly sound position financially but there is no Bank in the world can pay off all their depositors at a moment's notice.

He wrote to Flora again on 24 June that 'there is still no sign of the Government Savings Bank opening [but] ...during these last few days there is a better tone in world affairs consequent on a suggestion from America for a suspension of War debt payments for a time. Without such suspension

Europe would be in a very bad way and it looks as if Germany would collapse'. He ended his letter telling her that she was fortunate to be away from it all in the New Hebrides. He sent her further news on 12 August:

The Savings Bank is still closed ... we are all in the same boat with the bank not paying out ... There is a big conversion loan on taking in all the internal debt of Australia. It is supposed to be voluntary conversion but actually in practice it is compulsory.

Graham Kerr had converted his 6% 1938 loan, the interest now being 4%. He thought the world's monetary system was breaking down:

America and France, between them, practically hold the world's gold. The sterling exchange is very shaky. France and America came to the rescue with a loan, but things are not right yet ... we have to make the best of things and carry on.

I wonder if this was responsible for a Joint Regulation issued in Vila on 11 February 1931 by the two Resident Commissioners, Maurice Tronet, French Resident, and Richard Blandy, acting for Sir George Joy, British Resident, at present on leave:⁶ 'The Public is hereby notified that English and French Currency which is legal tender in England and France ... is similarly legal tender in the New Hebrides under the same conditions as England and France'.

There was no limit in either currency for gold and bank notes but for silver, 2 pounds was the maximum and copper 1 English shilling—for French silver and metal, maximum 50 francs, and copper, bronze and nickel, maximum 5 francs. 'Currencies of other nationalities will not be accepted in the Condominium Treasury, except as publicly notified'.

Perhaps the Treasury was being flooded with money it would not accept, proffered by panicked customers. The World Depression was being felt everywhere.

On 11 May Emile My, good friend and business colleague of my father, who had been ailing for some time, died at Sara plantation, near Shark Bay, Santo, where he and his wife were living with their son Jean. This event would prove to be an incalculable loss.

Graham Kerr's other good friend, Fernand Largeau, had just left Sydney in *Laperouse* to take over the direction of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in New Hebrides and Kerr was notified on 8 May that he, as a large shareholder in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, had been elected to the *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris now that *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was amalgamated with it.

He wrote to Joyer in Paris on 20 May telling him he was very pleased that Largeau was taking Pinelli's place:

Société Française should avoid too many useless fares back and forth between France and New Hebrides. The market for Copra is extremely low and Cacao is not brisk ... We must look for other avenues for revenue. These lines are not to be despised but I think much more might be done to exploit Coconuts, besides making Copra. Cacao we are selling here @ 38 pounds for ordinary and 40 pounds for Criolo [sic—criollo is a rare variety of cacao and considered a delicacy] but demand has been very slow for months; not on account of the price, but the general depressed state of business.⁷

In any case following abnormally dry weather coconut production would also have suffered although Hog Harbour plantation was not badly affected. He also commiserated with Joyer about the death of their mutual friend Emile My.

On 12 June a letter was sent to Graham Kerr from the Secretary-General of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* in Paris which may well have allayed some of his fears.⁸ They had been very pleased to elect him unanimously to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* on 8 May and Raoul-Duval had been charged with giving him the news:

We are convinced that our *Société* can only derive advantage, given your experience and knowledge of New Hebrides affairs. We have received your letter of 28 April and were pleased to know your opinion of Largeau. We hope he will work well for us in the New Hebrides and that you will not fail to give him your support and advice.

But then Graham Kerr's fears came back in full force. They had sent Charles-Bernard Dupertuis to New Zealand to enquire into the viability of a banana industry in the New Hebrides, saying that he had previously lived in the New Hebrides, employed for eighteen months in the business house of N. Hagen plus other appointments.⁹ They asked Kerr to make his work easier. 'We don't need to stress that we need your help in Australia.' This useless expense was exactly what was worrying Kerr. All they needed to have done was to ask him in Australia and he could have found all the information they needed and sent it back to them. A banana trade had been tried earlier in the century and definitely ruled out as a paying proposition. However, bowing to the wishes of the *Conseil Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* when Dupertuis and his family reached Sydney in early August he looked after their needs and entertained them at our home.

Meantime in New Hebrides Largeau had fallen ill soon after he arrived and had to come to Sydney for treatment. Here Graham Kerr looked after him, finding a specialist and hospital for him and visiting him frequently. He received a post card dated 6 July 1931 from Largeau after his return to Santo expressing his appreciation.

Not having been to the New Hebrides since before his visit to Paris in 1929–30 Graham Kerr decided a visit was necessary, taking with him Louis Vautier from the Sydney office. It was partly in connection with the coconut-husks for paper idea. With a big family to support, he had six children, and the family Island Merchant business, Kerr Bros. Ltd which included several sisters, and East Santo Plantations, all of which needed income. He was trying his best to find other income sources.

Kerr Bros were getting no financial return at all from their large share holding in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* now transferred to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. How to extricate the *Société* from the mess into which Vibert had got its New Hebridean enterprise occupied much of his mind.

When *Laperouse* reached Noumea on 15 August, he and Vautier saw M. Catalan about the coconut project which also included a plan to make a coconut cooking-fat. Catalan arranged an interview with New Caledonian Governor Joseph Guyon, who expressed interest and asked Graham Kerr to see him again after his trip to the New Hebrides.¹⁰ They also called on the Chamber of Agriculture and business houses including Barraus and Ballandes where he renewed his acquaintance with Corbin de Mangoux who was then managing its affairs.¹¹ Having Louis Vautier, a French speaker, with him to smooth out negotiations would have been a help.

In Vila they paid a courtesy call on the French Resident and the local agent of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, Maurice Gayon. They also visited the British Government Offices about the still not settled Annie Petersen estate¹² and his long-time friend William Lockhart Bell, before *Laperouse* left for the North.

At Port Sandwich they saw Marc Cariou before leaving for Norsup where *Compagnie Cotonnière*, directed by Edward Caillard, was situated. 'They seem to have put in much development work here' Kerr remarked. When they reached Luganville on the Second Channel, *Toa* from Hog Harbour was there to meet them with the plantation manager, W.T. Robertson. Many people came on board *Laperouse* to see him and he took Vautier to meet Auguste Houchard, who showed them over his place; then to Cassin's, Barrau's, Peyrolle's and Ratard's. *Toa* collected them here and took them back to *Laperouse* where Kerr entertained Robbie and Mat Wells from Malo to dinner.

Next day he and Vautier left with Robbie in *Toa* for Surunda where they were received by M. Ancelin and shown over the installations.¹³ Then the three of them went across to Théobroma where they met Fernand Largeau:

After *dejeuner* we walked back to Surunda and on through the plantations of cacao to Theobroma—well set up here with electric light etc. Vautier and I spent the night very comfortably ashore. Largeau and Ancelin live at Theobroma. Discussed business affairs with Largeau.

Next day they walked back to Surunda where they found *Laperouse* about to go on to Robert Petersen Stuart's anchorage at Aisse where *Toa* and Robbie were waiting for them. After visiting Mme. My they went on to Turtle Bay where they 'had an hour's run ashore, Vibert tearing round the plantation with us in a Citroen'. Then back on board *Laperouse* for the return trip.

When they reached Noumea he and Vautier accompanied by Catalan had a 'cordial interview' with Governor Guyon.

On his return to Sydney on 1 October Graham Kerr wasted no time writing to the General Secretary, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, in Paris. He claimed that his visit was too short to gather much useful information.¹⁴ With regard to Largeau whose health had been worrying the *Conseil*, Kerr stressed the attention Largeau gave to his work. 'He seems in good health and quite able to fulfil the important task with which he has been charged'. He mentioned his visit to Surunda and Turtle Bay. 'The time at my disposal did not permit me to visit either Téoouma or the Malo plantations.' After the drought the coconut palms at Malo seemed dried out and to be suffering from fly attack. The Santo palms on the other hand, seem to be green and flourishing.

He stressed that cacao trees needed special attention and that there needed to be specialist care for pruning, cutting off dead wood and replacing dead trees:

In many cases the trees are attacked by termites when they are growing next to old trees or stumps ... Cacao yield per hectare is substantially reduced because of diseased trees. A special team would be profitably employed by taking all the fields in turn and giving each one an expert and minute examination. The cacao plant is a very delicate shrub.

He was in favour of research to find the best variety of a plant for a particular locality and suggested that the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* set up an Agricultural Experiment Station. He thought it very regrettable that it had not been done earlier. He thought that the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* should turn its main attention to Santo:

With the present conditions of world trade, I would advise no work of expansion at Efate and little at Malo ... If the *Société's* program includes works of expansion, it is in my opinion that at Santo they should be undertaken.

Diplomatically, he did not mention Vibert in the letter but he did write of the pleasure he felt at travelling back to Noumea with Maurice Gayon and on to Sydney with M. Vigoureux who was going there to see an eye specialist.

By 22 October Vigoureux was back in Noumea where he had an interview with Governor Guyon. On his recent trip to Sydney with Kerr they had discussed the proposed banana trade. Vigoureux told Guyon that he entirely agreed with my father that it had no future:

To put into the hold of vessels going via the Panama Line, bananas, be it in skins or fig leaves, the ship having the main part of its cargo, copra from Fiji, Noumea and New Caledonia, the strong smell of the copra would infect the bananas [and render them unsaleable].¹⁵

On 4 November Graham Kerr met *Laperouse* with Largeau on board. He had come once again to Sydney to visit a doctor and Kerr had arranged for him to see Dr Poate and took him to Claremont Private Hospital in Liverpool Street where an examination was to be carried out. The report was not good and he was to have an operation. This took place on 11 November and my father saw him after attending a conference with the M. Cochet the new manager of *Messageries Maritimes* regarding business in the New Hebrides and the tourist trade to both New Caledonia and New Hebrides. With no family of his own in Sydney, Largeau was very appreciative of my father's attention. It was discovered that he had cancer of the intestine but Dr Poate thought he had managed to remove all of it.

Kerr received a confidential radio from *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris asking for a first-hand report on Largeau's condition which Dr Poate provided. On 9 December Kerr sent off this reply plus a cable in shortened form:¹⁶

The doctor's report is that the operation was entirely successful and that according to all evidence Mr Largeau will enjoy his usual good health ... Mr Largeau is quite well and will be ready to leave on the *Morinda* for the New Hebrides on 19 Dec.

He collected Largeau and his luggage from Petty's Hotel and took him to the ship on that date.

All this was fitted in to Graham Kerr's hectic life style. On 2 November he had got rid of the Wolseley he brought back from his trip abroad in 1929-30. One car, the Chevrolet, was enough. Cash was getting tighter. On 17 November the Australian Bank of Commerce merged with the Bank of New South Wales so perhaps money could now be withdrawn.

With regard to East Santo Plantations run conjointly by Kerr Brothers and Emile My, on 27 November Walter Lister Kerr, who was son of the late James Walter Kerr the eldest Kerr brother and also accountant for East Santo Plantation, presented the figures for the year to June 1931. Trading Accounts for Copra:

The fall in price has caused a big falling off in the profit for copra; this is evident from the sales, which are more than 600 pounds less than last year although this year's production exceeded that of last year.¹⁷

Graham Kerr and other members of the office staff usually met ships arriving from the Islands. When *Morinda* arrived on 8 December he looked after his sister Flora Nicol from Tanna and helped Mr and Mrs Pujol and her father get their Customs papers accepted. 'Mme. Pujol has some Tonkinese blood in her—eventually got them all clear'. The White Australia Policy remained in full force in Australia.

On 3 December Graham Kerr received an appreciative letter from *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris in answer to his of 1 October. Largeau was to be told to organise a special team to look after the cacao trees as Kerr had suggested.¹⁸ If *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* could get financial help from the French government it would think seriously of setting up an experiment station. They were happy to agree with him that the main object should be to maintain the crops and plantations already held and increase their output. Largeau was to be told to stop all work on a suggested banana plantation. They were of the same opinion as Kerr that Santo should be the centre of their efforts. If the present crisis—the Depression—lessens, and the price of products return to more normal levels, and our man-power is better utilised, SFNH in a short time might be able to balance its budget. The Secretary-General ended his letter: 'We continue to receive with pleasure your advice and suggestions on all questions concerning our *Société*'.

But in fact what was going on in Paris at this time would not have reassured him. There had been a Board Meeting of the *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on 2 December attended by André Joyer and H. Vereecken, shareholders in the reorganised *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and previously Directors of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* before the amalgamation of these companies into *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. As a result of this meeting both these men got the idea that things were being hidden from the shareholders so they visited the President *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, E. Picanon, who reassured them.

On 9 December, however they decided to put their fears as shareholders in writing; in a letter to Picanon. I have already referred to some of these letters in discussing those exchanged between Joyer and Graham Kerr earlier in the year. At the time of the merger in 1930 it had been arranged that the *Conseil* of the expanded *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* should include, beside Government representatives, four or five people with financial and technical expertise. Amongst these were to be two who knew about colonial agricultural development and another who knew the New Hebrides. Although not

mentioned by name this was to be Graham Kerr. The letter-writers and the other shareholders had been very pleased with the appointments, but...

Eighteen months had passed and the new expanded *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was still without a Deputy Director. A competent, technically qualified Deputy Director needed to be appointed immediately and no more than 250.000 francs per annum, including salaries, was to be spent in Paris. It had been agreed that in the current state of affairs, real-estate deals and agriculture combined could not support a higher charge'. The writers and their fellow shareholders put the blame for the worst troubles on poor central organisation in Paris:

In place of a Director at Vila and Santo, changeable and too often without effective power, we want one only, at Santo, stable and strong, in close and confidential contact with the Deputy Administrator in Paris and with him alone, to the exclusion of all other people.

At present there was a multiplicity of agents in the New Hebrides instead of a technically qualified Director and, as yet, no Deputy Director in Paris for him to liaise with. All this led to poor communication between Paris and New Hebrides. There was little knowledge in either place of agricultural exploitation, production, necessary expenditure, efficient management of staff and labour, health issues and so on. All documentation including financial accounting, between the two places was slow and incomplete. The writers thought that rapidity and diligence in transmitting all information between the Paris and New Hebrides was 'indispensable to assure good management of enterprises as remote from their headquarters as ours are'. This would be obviated with close communication between one Director in New Hebrides and the Deputy Director of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris.

There was also conjecture about the yearly balance sheet of expenses now due. There was a rule allowing for the presentation of the balance sheet to the General Assembly with a year's delay:

It is all too certain that the situation at the end of the 1930 fiscal year will only be known to the shareholders in the second half of 1932.

The letter ended:

At a time of rapid exhaustion of industrial treasuries, of ours in particular, a redoubling of vigilance is demanded. We permit ourselves to bring to the attention of the Board the urgency of finding a solution to the questions raised. Any delay is liable to compromise irremediably the interests of the shareholders.

These ideas echoed the opinions of Corbin de Mangoux and Graham Kerr who, it is important to realise, had allies in Paris who agreed with him.

Joyer and Vereecken did not let it go at that. On 29 December they sent a copy of the letter they had sent to the President of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to the Minister for Colonies.¹⁹

On 28 December 1931 the Secretary-General *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* sent off its last communication for the year to Graham Kerr regarding his appointment of M. Raoul-Duval to represent him at the next Assembly General of shareholders.²⁰ Kerr had signed and forwarded the required forms the previous July with the date left open as it was not yet known when it would take place. He now learned that it would be held in February 1932 and the Balance Sheet would be presented with an indication of the present situation in the New Hebrides.

Endnotes

- 1 See Joyer Letter File. Kerr to Joyer 8 Jan 1931. Orange Folder 1, Archive Box 19.
- 2 See Joyer Letter file.
- 3 See Joyer Letter File. Kerr to Joyer 8 April 1931.
- 4 Following the acrimony that resulted from the disputed tree-count my father was bending over backwards—too far in my opinion—to avoid further unpleasantness.
- 5 See White envelope No. 7. Corres. File 2. Kerr Family from G.L. S. Kerr 1929-1931. Also included here are letters dated 12 June, 24 June, and 12 Aug 1931 to his sister Flora Nicol.
- 6 See White envelope No.7. Corres. File 2. 11 Feb 1931.
- 7 See Joyer letter file.
- 8 Found in the *Outre Mer* Archives Paris, 1983. 71 APC SFNH Serie II, No. 29, Administrateurs - Kerr. See Paris Notebook No.1, p.66.
- 9 For a short biography of Dupertuis see *Hébridais* pp. 59-60.
- 10 Much of the information here is from entries in my father's 1931 diary.
- 11 Corbin de Mangoux paid four visits to the Pacific between 1929 and 1952.
- 12 This continued through the year with correspondence back and forth with his lawyer, Wallace in Vila. After the judgement given so incomprehensibly to SFNH by the President of the Joint Court, no Certificate of Title to what Annie Petersen's estate actually was, had been issued. 'Strange are the ways of governments at times' wrote my father to Wallace on 8 May 1931. Sir George Joy's idea that the British government which had bought the land over 20 years earlier and thus should have faced up to the demands of SFNH and the French Government had not been accepted by the Colonial Office. My father applied to the British Resident Commissioner again on 18 Dec 1931 to pay Annie Petersen what was still due to her. At the time of its sale to Merton King, he had kept the price of her well-situated land considerably lower than that offered by other property owners, so as to facilitate the setting up of Condominium offices. See Yellow Folder No. 9. History of the Vysuck Estate. Letters dated 10 March, 12 March, 26 March, 8 May and 18 December 1931.
- 13 Louis Ancelin was the local Director of CAMNH (*Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*) with his headquarters at Surunda. See *Hébridais* pp. 2-3 for a short biography.
- 14 This letter dated Sydney 1 Oct 1931 was probably translated into French for him by Louis Vautier. It is signed by my father. Found in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris. 71 APC SFNH, Serie II, No. 29, Administrateurs—Kerr. See Folder 10. Xeroxes in chron. order.
- 15 This conference with the High Commissioner given here in rough translation was also found in the *Outre Mer* Archives 71 APC, SFNH, Serie II. See Paris Notebook No. 1, pp. 57–58.
- 16 *Outre Mer* Archives 71 APC, SFNH, Serie II, Administrateurs—Kerr. See Folder No.10. Xeroxes in chron. order.
- 17 See White Envelope No.12. E.S.P. File. 27 Nov 1931.
- 18 See Paris Notebook No.1, pp.67-68. Letters found by me in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris in 1983.
- 19 On 30 May 1932, Joyer sent a copy of the report sent to Picanon on 9 Dec 1931 and the letter to the Minister for Colonies dated 29 Dec 1931 for Kerr's information. For copies of these letters plus translations see Joyer Letter File.
- 20 See Paris Notebook 1, pp. 68-69 Sec-General SFNH to G.L.S. Kerr 28 Dec 1931.

Chapter 14 1932: Graham Kerr's Dreadful Situation is Now Revealed in its Entirety

For Graham Kerr the first half of 1932 passed with him giving full attention to business in Sydney and dealing with East Santo Plantations (ESP).

Annie Petersen's Vysuck Estate also came in for more correspondence. Sir George Joy, the British Resident Commissioner, wrote to him on 21 January 1932 that 'the purchase by H.M.'s Government of certain land known as the Petersen Estate' was still occupying his attention and asking him had he any further proposals to make. No solution was yet in sight. Joy was sending a copy of the letter to Wallace, whom, he presumed, was still handling the matter.

On 1 February Wallace, acknowledging receipt of the letter, brought up another matter that both he and Kerr considered had been legally settled on 11 October 1928, when the final settlement for the properties that Kerr Bros had sold to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* on 7 February 1927 had been signed by Audoin for the French company in the British Residence. This settlement replaced the one drawn up on 28 August 1928 in which the property of Malapai, on Mai (Émaé) Island, no part of the original deal, had been included by mistake by Wallace who was acting solicitor for the Kerrs.¹

On arrival in Vila from Sydney in 1928 Graham Kerr had signed the first one finding the mistake later. The French then refused to pay the rest of the money owing, claiming that Kerr's Power of Attorney to act for Kerr Bros had run out. Hence there was an emended October settlement. Wallace thought that the 28 August 1928 settlement should be destroyed by the French or returned to the Kerrs for destruction. But the French thought differently.

Wallace now told him that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* were now, five years later in February 1932, trying to claim Makapai based on the disallowed document Graham Kerr had signed on 28 August 1928. Wallace asked Graham Kerr to send him the sale receipt under seal of your company for sale of Makapai.²

In another letter dated 21 May 1932 Wallace acknowledged receipt of Kerr's letter of 10 May regarding the Petersen estate and the land on Mai, also claimed by the French:

Re Mai land. I note that the old Co. of Kerr Bros. has been wound up. I would suggest that you should write to the Registrar of the [Joint] Court what you write to the SFNH in Paris, enclosing a copy of your letter to Paris; with this send a statutory declaration that the old Company had received the purchase money in full on such and such a date, and if possible set out extracts from the old books showing the payment.³

I see the hand of Vibert here—working with Audoin who was authorised from Paris to sign the final hand-over—revenging himself on Graham Kerr for his outspoken condemnation of his incompetence. Closely allied as Vibert was with the Director of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris, Charles Aupied, none of their dealings were yet exactly known to most of the *Conseil* and the shareholders in Paris. A case was gradually being built up to prove that Kerr Bros and their agent, Graham Kerr, were dishonest and that they would be the main cause of what could not be concealed when the Balance Sheets for 1930-1931 came out. At the time Graham Kerr knew nothing of this. No more seems to have been heard of the balance sheet for 1930 that was supposed to be presented to the shareholders in February 1932.

Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides was also now querying land held by East Santo Plantations near Point Olry as well as Makapai as the Secretary General *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* told Graham Kerr on 24 February and repeated on 4 May. Vibert was looking into the matter. In the same letter Kerr was told that the accounts for 1931 were being despatched to *Société Française* headquarters in Paris instead of being put in order in by a bookkeeper in Vila.

Earlier, on 7 March Graham Kerr had received a telegram from Paris asking him as a member of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* executive to go with an accountant to Vila and discharge their present bookkeeper.⁴ Kerr arranged with a man called Bruce Rainsford to consider the job but the latter could not leave until 30 March and demanded 360F per day plus travel expenses. If accepted, Rainsford would go first to Noumea and engage a bookkeeper there to put the books in proper order. On 4 May it looked as if headquarters had changed its mind:

At the moment we are studying a plan of complete reorganisation of our book-keeping section which will allow us to be constantly *au courant* with what is happening.⁵

They were looking forward to seeing Kerr in Paris later in the year, they said. But something else was going on too. In March Vibert sent a memo from Santo to Charles Aupied in Paris about the other properties Kerr Bros owned in the Pacific area to his present knowledge. These were Graham Kerr's home in Sydney, Kerr Bros' business house in Sydney, the shares they owned in East Santo Plantations at Hog Harbour and Sakau, and Pilotin Island which my father had excluded from the sale of Turtle Bay to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. Vibert had instructed Sydney for more certain information and on receipt it would be forwarded to Paris.⁶

From a letter sent to Graham Kerr by Raoul-Duval on 15 March, on behalf of the *Conseil Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, it seemed that they were having problems with M. Rohr their chief accountant in New Hebrides who, either from incompetence or malice, they said was not able to provide the documents needed for the Balance Sheets.⁷ The price Rainsford asked for the job was too high and his proposed stay too short so Graham Kerr was told to cancel the proposition.

On 24 March Kerr replied that he was afraid that he had not been much help to the *Conseil* regarding the supposed problems with Rohr. He ended the letter with a suggestion for the *Société* 'an annual audit of accounts by an independent auditor. In Australia this audit is legally obligatory for limited liability companies'. He thought that in the time available 'a comprehensive audit could be obtained at a reasonable rate'.⁸

On the same date Kerr received another letter of explanation from the Secretary-General, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* definitely accusing Mr Rohr of incompetence:

In spite of many demands from HQ and Mr Rohr's formal promises, the accounts department of our *Société* is at the present time 8 months late for the former *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, whose last accounts received by HQ are dated 31 October 1929; those of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* are up to 30 June 1930—the date when the three plantation *Sociétés* were taken over by SFNH. The books of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* are in our hands up to 31 December 1931 but as a result of the negligence—not to say more—of Mr Rohr, the inventory up to 31 December of the same year, set up on each of the stations, has not been centralised by this accountant who has declared he has not been able to do it. Because of this we find it impossible to give our shareholders a report for the financial year 1930 within the time allowed by law ... That is why, in spite of the testimonials of satisfaction and praise given to Mr Rohr by Mr Gayon [erstwhile *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* Director in the New Hebrides] and the Inspector for Colonies [M. Cazaux], the *Conseil*, regarding this employee as a man of ill will and bad nature, has decided to dismiss him.⁹

So the *Société* now knows the reason for the delay in presenting balance sheets and the culprit. Fernand Largeau had informed them on 19 March that all the accounts for 1931 as well as the inventory

to the same date would be forwarded to Paris by the May courier. The letter ended with the Secretary-General sending Graham Kerr 'our best wishes'.

On 27 April Graham Kerr notified them that he would be leaving for France on 7 June and would be in Paris in July. In his letter he did not go into commercial matters, regarding bananas which he had been asked about or other ones of his own that he was pursuing regarding coconut cream and the use of coconut husks for board-making. Instead he sent two Powers of Attorney for Messrs E. Raoul-Duval to represent him at *Conseil* meetings until he himself arrived.

Louis Vautier of Kerr Bros Sydney office was to accompany him on this trip, partly to help him with the coconut proposition, partly to visit to his parents who lived in France, and hopefully to gain employment there. In connection with the coconut proposition, they went to Clyde Engineering works in Pyrmont, Sydney to see its drying machine. 'We shall require drying plant if our proposed works in New Caledonia come into being'. Graham Kerr was moving heaven and earth to make *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* into a profit-making company both in New Hebrides and New Caledonia for its shareholders and, seemingly, his ideas were reaching a sympathetic audience.

On 25 May the Secretary-General *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris asked him to send them copies of Australian periodicals and reviews containing articles on New Hebrides in general and our *Société* in particular. He said that M. Vigoureux had sent an issue of the *Pacific Islands Monthly* for 25 January 1932 'of which certain passages are of real importance to the future of our affairs in the New Hebrides'.¹⁰

It was at this time, on 30 May, that Kerr received a letter from Joyer with the letter he and M. Ver-eecken had sent to the President of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and the French Minister for Colonies in December 1931 in protest at the mismanagement of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, which I discussed in my last chapter. It would have made him feel that at last something was being done.

We all saw our father off to Europe aboard *Ballarat* on 7 June. He always liked his family to farewell him. Mr and Mrs Vautier were also saying goodbye to Sydney.

When they reached Colombo he called at the *Messageries Maritimes* agents there who had arranged a visit to Dodwell's Desiccated Coconut Factory at Negombo about 25 miles out of Colombo. He found it not very up-to-date and with little in the way of labour-saving devices but worth seeing.

They reached Tilbury Docks on the Thames on 22 July and wasting no time Kerr and Vautier interviewed the managing director of Bovins and Co. to discuss board-making machinery. This was a Swedish firm whose chief engineer was at present in Sweden. It was later arranged that he would contact Graham Kerr in Paris. They then visited Rose, Downs and Thompson Ltd in Hull regarding oil mill-

ing machinery for the coconut cream proposition and about a shelling machine for castor seed, having a long interview with the Managing Director.

They reached Paris on 28 July. Looking around the places he already knew Kerr wrote 'it seems I have not been away from Paris'. On 3 August he and Vautier had a long interview with André Joyer who 'threw some interesting light on SFNH matters'. They also discussed his coconut proposition for which he had just received particulars and quotations for machinery



Photo 46: Copy of a recent photograph of the firm visited by Graham Kerr and Louis Vautier in England in 1933: Rose Downs & Thompson Ltd, Hull (cc-by-sa/2.0—copyright—Ian D—geograph.org.uk/p/4913827 but licensed for further reuse.) Photo taken on 9 April 2016: <http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/4913827>.

from the firm he had visited while in London. Joyer was about to go on his summer vacation 'unfortunately for us' wrote Graham Kerr.

They then visited *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* headquarters where they saw Charles Aupied for a few minutes and had a long talk with M. Baratau, the Secretary-General. They next rang Raoul-Duval who was arriving from Le Havre the next day. They had a long interview with him on arrival and afterwards with Mr Aupied, following which Kerr wrote in his diary 'I do not think this man is to be trusted'.

In between times Kerr and Vautier were busy interviewing various firms about manufacture of coconut cream and building boards, both propositions to utilize every part of the coconut and other products of the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*'s plantation-companies in the New Hebrides and far removed from Aupied's ideas for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. It was a very stressful time for Graham Kerr trying to find somewhere congenial to stay and writing reports for the next *Conseil* meeting due on 11 August which Vautier was to translate into French for him.

On 10 August he found

... they have been unable to get a meeting of *Conseil* for to-morrow. It will probably be late next week ... Vautier finished [translating] our address ... I do not want to put it in before we get them all together, face to face. We have Aupied and I think, Raoul-Duval, against us. I do not want them to have an opportunity of trying to influence the passive ones [*Conseil* members] against our proposition. We may prepare a brief summary to send to the members of *Conseil* beforehand but not disclosing our hand too much. With Joyer's assistance I may try and get a change in the control of SFNH. Aupied is no good and their administration is hopeless.¹¹

Kerr at that time had no real idea of what he was up against. The summer heat of Paris and the fact that he was not a Frenchman had its effect on a non-French-speaker who was far from home and his family and trying to bring to fruition a proposition to turn *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* into a financial success. He went with Vautier to *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* in connection with the shares he held in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* now converted into *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shares—and thus into the control of Aupied.

Vibert had been busy on behalf of Aupied. A detailed history of the Kerr business dealings in New Hebrides since 1903, probably provided by the French Commercial Attaché to the French Embassy in Sydney and dated 11 August 1932, was received in Paris at this time. It would be updated in 1934, 1935, 1936 and 1937 and was probably glowing enough to give Aupied the idea of milking the company dry.¹²

Kerr was notified on 12 August that the *Conseil* was to meet on 18 August. Vautier was away from Paris visiting relations but returned on 17 August and they discussed the coconut proposition and took a summary of their address to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* before the meeting.

Graham Kerr wrote to his agent in Marseilles on 18 August, Messrs Th. and Ed. Jullien, with whom he enjoyed very good relations, thanking them for their attempts to obtain the best possible prices on the market for the products Kerr Bros in Sydney sent them on behalf of clients in New Hebrides and East Santo Plantations. He had no high hopes as the Depression was biting deeply:

It is true that the market gives us no encouragement but we should accept ... the best sale possible with the least cost.

He then cast light on his current efforts in Paris:

I am here with Mr Vautier to see if is possible to sell in the French market vegetable fat from the coconut, even in the country of production.

His idea was to build a factory to produce it in New Caledonia which would help the faltering economy of that French colony and prevent the expense of transporting the raw produce such long

distances—anything for a good financial return. Unilever at that time had the monopoly and Kerr thought their price might well be undercut.¹³

Aupied could not find another excuse to postpone the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* meeting scheduled for 18 August and in his diary Kerr noted this as his 'first meeting as Administrator in SFNH'. Vautier was with him and with the permission of *Conseil* and he on Kerr's behalf addressed the meeting on the idea of a factory in New Caledonia.

It was the French holiday season with nearly everyone away and Vautier now joined them, visiting his father, while Graham Kerr stuck it out in the sweltering heat thinking of his previous visit in 1929-30 with Muriel and his youngest daughter Nancy. He was homesick. From what he read in the newspapers he felt that the Australian rate of exchange could not be kept as high as it currently was and set about transmitting some copra credit for East Santo Plantations back to Australia before it fell.¹⁴

On 27 August he went to visit Mme. Largeau:

She is very upset at not knowing where Mr Largeau is. She heard from Rue Scribe [*Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*] that he left New Hebrides by *Laperouse* on 1 August for Sydney.

Graham Kerr had hoped that she would have had a radio from Largeau direct as Kerr too wanted to see him badly regarding *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* affairs. 'I am now afraid he is ill'.

On 1 September he received a telegram from Sydney that Largeau was on the *Comorin*, a *Messageries Maritimes*, vessel that travelled to Marseilles via Panama not calling at Sydney. He went immediately to let Mme. Largeau know. 'She has been in a terrible state of suspense.'

On 8 September he and Vautier had a long meeting about *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* matters with André Joyer now back from his vacation and looking forward to seeing Kerr again. They then went to visit *Messageries Maritimes* about the rescheduling of their shipping route to take in Saigon and he also met up with M. Louis Ancelin a long-time resident in the New Hebrides and Director of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* now living in France.

On 9 September Graham Kerr wrote to the Secretary-General, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, asking to be sent as soon as possible copies of the minutes of the meetings of the *Conseil* on the date of his nomination to the board on 8 May 1931 as this was the meeting which immediately preceded the meetings of 27 July and 18 August.¹⁵ He was anxious to know what salary Vibert received, his period of engagement and whether he and his family got free passages.

He received a reply from Charles Aupied the next day regretting that the much-reduced state of personnel of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would not permit the copying of *Conseil* meetings 8 May to date. He was told that copies of the Accounts Register could be seen at their headquarters.¹⁶ Kerr spent all the next day there except when it closed for lunch, reading the Minutes of meetings since his election to the *Conseil* and taking notes. He also tried to see another old Islands acquaintance, Jules Leconte, who had been a colleague of Largeau's on the *Syndicat Français Agricole et Commercial des Nouvelles-Hébrides* in Vila and until recently Director of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* but was now back in France.

On 13 September he sent a draft of a letter to Edouard Picanon, President of the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil*, to Vautier for translation. In it he asked for a meeting to discuss amongst other matters (1) the long overdue meeting of the General Assembly of shareholders and the absolute necessity of calling it; (2) the appointment of Leon Vibert as Director-General; and (3) the matter of the proposed absorption of *Société des Iles du Pacifique* (SIP). Vautier was not in Paris at the time but with his family.

Kerr also saw Leconte who helped him to look for an apartment as he was not happy with his present one. On 16 September he wrote to East Santo Plantations agents in Marseille, the Jullien brothers, that he would like to visit them but, as a member of the Board of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which was holding its annual meeting soon, he was not able to come.¹⁷ Anxious to see Largeau, who

had first-hand knowledge of the New Hebrides situation, Graham Kerr wrote a letter to be delivered to him when his ship reached Marseilles.

Vautier's translation of the letter to Picanon came on 15 September.¹⁸ It expanded on the three points. Regarding (1) the General Assembly of shareholders, he pointed that it was in conformity with the law, and that shareholders should be able to exercise their right to a certain amount of control and to know the financial situation of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. Regarding (2) Vibert, he considered it a dangerous nomination and he saw no justification for the *Conseil* naming him as Director-General. With grave doubts as to Vibert's suitability for the five year appointment at a high rate of remuneration plus extras and bonuses, he wanted to know where the shareholders interests came in. Vautier provided the following words for Kerr's letter:

Are we a charitable society? Do you think it is wise to make a contract for five years during a time of high economic instability? The value of the franc appreciates or, if you prefer, the paper money of most of the other countries depreciates, which comes to the same thing. Supposing the value of the franc goes on appreciating against the Swiss franc, you will be paying Vibert a fabulous sum.

As for qualities and aptitudes needed for the position for which you have named him, I have had nearly 40 years experience in the New Hebrides; from the point of view of plantation management, labour, stores, shipping, buying and selling of merchandise and products of the islands, I have been successful there. Does this experience count for nothing? I am the head of Kerr Bros. Ltd and East Santo Plantations which not only pays its expenses but also dividends to its shareholders. You did not consult me [he had sold the plantations that formed *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*], on the subject of Vibert's nomination. You send the Pinellis, Largeaus and Viberts and recall them at great expense. I protest. Vibert will make beautiful plantations for you but they will only be on paper. He is a play-actor. The shareholders do not see these things as marvellous. All they see is their capital going away for the benefit of a character like Vibert. You tell me to wait for a few more years... Can we afford to wait? I ask you to suspend Vibert while an enquiry is made on the spot...

Regarding (3) with respect to the proposed absorption of *Société des Iles du Pacifique* (SIP):

Firstly I disapprove of all new expenses for SFNH. I do not know the political aspects but I can say that SIP properties are unproductive and would involve considerable expense.

I now come to the last part of Kerr's letter which is interesting because it reinforces what other people had to say on the question of Australia's interests in the New Hebrides:

As for the statement that Australia wants to acquire properties in the New Hebrides, this is only propaganda ... She has her hands full already and she can scarcely govern what she has. A certain pressure from the Presbyterian Mission and its friends is inevitable but Australia cannot take on this task. On the other hand, it is certain that a vote taken by the British population in the New Hebrides would favour annexation by France, or the continuation of the Condominium because of the lightness of taxes. SFNH should consolidate what it has rather than take on new charges.

He had not left Picanon in any doubts as to his thoughts on these matters and received a note on 16 September to say that a meeting of the *Conseil* at his request was to be held on 21 September. The next day he received a telegram for Largeau in Marseilles saying that he would be in Paris on 19 September. He and Vautier had a meeting with André Joyer on 19 September and Kerr then went to Largeau's home. He found him looking well instead of ill, as he had feared. He saw him again next day and typed out statements for the forthcoming *Conseil* meeting.

The *Conseil* meeting took place as arranged, which happened to be Kerr's 59th birthday and the three matters he had brought up were discussed:

We had rather hot arguments at times as of course they had to stick up for their appointment of Vibert—my protest was put in the minutes however. We have another reunion of the *Conseil* fixed for 7 October and the *Assemblée Générale* is promised for the first week in November.

He would have been at a considerable disadvantage at putting over his points as Vautier was not with him at the meeting and his French was minimal. That night he went to bed early, 'seeing as how I am a year older'.

On 23 September he caught the train to Le Havre to see Raoul-Duval. Here he met up with Vautier. They

... had a long discussion with [Raoul-Duval] on SFNH matters—impressing him with the necessity for a change in administration and the impossibility of success with present methods. I think I made a very good impression on him—I am putting forward that the responsible *Administrateurs* must be on the spot, not in Paris, if we are going to do any good.

The fact that Raoul-Duval was bilingual and he also had Vautier with him would have made this meeting go better.

Back in Paris on 26 September, he visited Rue Scribe where he saw Mr Nicholle, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* Accountant. 'Speaking to him on the system of accounts, books used etc, also the treatment of the Island accounts' he then went through the book covering headquarter expenses 'for the 12 months to June last—the expenses here are quite ridiculous for all the good done here'. He then visited Largeau who was not home but Mme. Largeau was and he arranged a meeting of Joyer, Largeau, Vautier and himself for 29 September.

Next day Graham Kerr turned up at Rue Scribe again and continued his examination of the General Expenses book for headquarters and found 'some nasty looking payments to Aupied' which led him to get a copy of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides's* Articles of Association, the *Statuts*. He was now hot on the trail.

He had been enquiring after Largeau and on hearing that he was sick went to his home and found him ill in bed. 'It seems only his stomach that is upset'. Surely this was wishful thinking on Kerr's part, with an eye to the scheduled meeting for the next day.

The meeting did take place as arranged. It was a long meeting at which *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* matters were discussed and Largeau was present. It looked as if matters would be drawn-out so Vautier could get a temporary job and remain in Paris. He was preparing the speech that Graham Kerr was to give at the coming *Conseil*.

On 3 October Kerr went to Rue Scribe to see the balance sheet but it was not available. He had contacted Raoul-Duval, asking to see him before the 7 October *Conseil* meeting. He received a reply arranging for them to catch up just before the *Conseil* meeting commenced. In between times he tried unsuccessfully to see Largeau.

Here is what his diary had to say of the *Conseil* meeting:

Raoul-Duval in to see me shortly before 9am—could only have a few minutes with him as meeting of *Conseil* is at 9.30—explained what I intended to move at today's meeting and asked for his support—went to meeting—when we got to Finance I put forward my motion for economics—it acted like a bomb shell—Aupied lost his head entirely and the old President [Picanon] took to trembling like a leaf—at one stage the sitting was nearly suspended—Aupied used all the bad things he could say of me—I brought him up once or twice, but kept my head entirely—anyway they would not accept my motion at all. I then moved that the members of *Conseil* serve gratis as from 1 October—more explosions—they would not accept this either—the wonderful things [Aupied] has done for

the *Société* were brought out. Almost with tears—he has worked day and night, Saturday and Sunday, this was backed up by Mme. Mura, Secretary, and Baratau, *Secrétaire-Général*. Naturally retrenchment would be no good to them.

Eventually the meeting broke up somewhat in disorder. Raoul-Duval said very little during the meeting and was very apologetic about the rejection of my motion. The Government representative, Mr Campion, said nothing one way or the other... Salins and Gerdret just echo the President.¹⁹

He then enumerated the names of those present, ending with himself 'alone and unafraid'. He returned to his apartment and wrote to Vautier 'rather cast-down with these "rotters" controlling the situation'.

He undoubtedly knew in theory what everyone in the Islands had long known about the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*' Paris Boards of Management being always in debt. Maybe Kerr believed this one would be better? But nothing had changed. Financial corruption and absolute refusal to allow the company to be managed anywhere else but in Paris was still the rule. And to have this forcibly shown up by a British foreigner, even if he was a big shareholder and member of *Conseil* was altogether too much.

Graham Kerr felt a little better next day but was lonely for his family in Sydney so he walked to look at places he had lived with Muriel and Nancy in happier days. He also tried to see Largeau without success, until on 9 October he found he was in hospital but his condition not thought to be serious. He visited him in hospital with Mme. Largeau the next day. He invited Vautier to come to Paris from his parent's place as his guest on 12 October and they both went to the hospital but were not allowed to see Largeau.

Mme. Largeau gave him the Paris address of Maurice Gayon, erstwhile local Director of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in New Hebrides. Kerr fixed a meeting for himself and Vautier with Gayon and Joyer for the 14 October. Before this meeting he went to Rue Scribe asking about the Balance Sheet and saw for Aupied for a few minutes. Next day, 15 October, he and Vautier went back to Rue Scribe 'to see how [Aupied was] reacting to my bomb shell of last meeting. I find it has had the desired effect—they are now embracing my proposal as their own ... we got quite a lot of information from Aupied, but gave him very little in return. He was falling over himself to appease me'.

When they arrived home they were met with the bad news that Largeau had died that morning. Graham Kerr 'was very sorry indeed as he was a straight-going man and absolutely open'. He had known Largeau 'since about 1896'. First Emile My had died now Fernand Largeau; and both staunch friends. He was now indeed alone. He then notified both Gayon and Leconte of Largeau's death and sent a letter of sympathy to Mme. Largeau.

Kerr's attempt to change *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* was far from over. Still hopeful and gulled by Aupied's apparent change of mind, Kerr drew up a budget of expenditure for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* for 1933 ready for a consultation with Raoul-Duval.

On 17 October Gayon called to see him. He had 'had a conversation with Inspector Cazaux, who made an inspection of operations of companies in New Hebrides in which the Government is interested. Mr Cazaux had some severe remarks to make on Vibert's operations [and] praised Largeau and book-keeper Rohr'. Once more Kerr was receiving support from a person who knew the situation.

Kerr had approached Joyer to see if he could recommend Vautier for temporary employment. Joyer replied on 18 October that he had been pleased to make Vautier's acquaintance but was very preoccupied at the moment. 'I have been like you, sadly impressed by the death of Mr Largeau. A good friend has left us'.

The meeting with Raoul-Duval took place on 20 October and they went into the figures for the proposed budget for 1933. The next day Graham Kerr went to Rue Scribe along with the other members of the *Conseil*, to sign an authorisation for the President of the *Tribune de Commerce* to appoint a *commissaire aux comptes* to audit the 1931 Balance Sheet. This was necessitated because there had not been a General Assembly of Shareholders *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* the previous year. On 27 October he met

Huet of New Caledonia at noon. He rang me up asking me to meet him. He is a pleasant enough fellow to meet but his reputation is a bad one, so I made an excuse when he asked me to have lunch with him.

On 3 November he had a meeting with Ancelin and on returning to his hotel found a notice that the General Assembly was to be held on 24 November. Next day he was:

Up early—walked to the Rue Scribe ... had a meeting with Raoul-Duval and Aupied before *Conseil* meeting at 9.30. These people are quite hopeless and I can see nothing but disaster ahead for SFNH. Aupied has fantastic schemes for getting more money from French *Credit National* to play with. He has an idea to take over properties in New Hebrides which are up to their neck, and mostly submerged in debt and thus get money from *Credit National*—no constructive business ideas whatever, only more liabilities, can only lead to disaster.

Later that day another discussion was supposed to take place but it came to nothing. Kerr 'only went back to tell Raoul-Duval that it is futile to discuss matters further unless there is a change in the method of running things—these damned fools will never make plantations from Paris'. Nobody turned up so he did not wait, intending to write to Raoul-Duval instead. This he did on 5 November.²⁰ He told him that he had not waited to see him as he thought it a waste of time

... when you and Mr Aupied [have] already made up your minds that present methods are to continue. However I wish to warn you that in my opinion we are heading for disaster, if we are not already there. If you think that I am looking for a position, you are greatly mistaken.

Seeing how things are going, and with a personal knowledge of New Hebrides affairs that neither you nor Mr Aupied possess, I offered my services. You make a personal matter of it, yet it should not be a personal matter at all but a matter of principle, the principle being that you cannot run plantations in New Hebrides from Paris, and never will, and doubly so when you have no personal knowledge of the Islands or actual conditions there.

These fantastic schemes regarding taking over properties can only increase our difficulties ... Our first duty is to put our own house in order. It seems to me as if our shares will soon not be worth the paper they are printed on. If you and Mr Aupied are satisfied with your methods, perhaps you will buy out my shares for which 1,250,000 francs cash went in, besides my holding of *Parts de Fondateur* [Founder's shares]. I know you will not buy them although you maintain that you are running the *Société* in the right direction ... As to the great achievements in monies saved ... by Mr Aupied... a manager who does not pay out monies that should not be paid out, is only doing the first elementary duty to his *Société*.

Vautier was again in Paris on 8 November for the day and he and Kerr had a long meeting with André Joyer and afterwards Kerr wrote to the President *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, Picanon, about irregularities in connection with the calling of the General Assembly and sent off a copy of the letter to Raoul-Duval.²¹

On 9 November he noted in his diary that 'yesterday Roosevelt seems to have soundly defeated Hoover' in the United States presidential election, 'and a good thing too'.

Vautier was back in Paris for the night and he and Kerr made an appointment to see Charles Revel, head of *Compagnie Cotonnière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and made an appointment with him for the next day. They also saw Ancelin and Leconte. He and Vautier saw Mr Revel at his home as arranged: 'Had a cordial talk with him, mostly on the coconut proposal'.

Saturday 12 November was the third anniversary of the day, he, Muriel and baby Nancy arrived in Paris as he noted in his diary. If only they had been there to assuage his loneliness. Instead he went to Rue Scribe to see the Balance Sheets for 1930 and 1931 and also the Inventories. On 10 November he received a letter

from the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* about the General Assembly Meeting set down for 24 November. He was told that the receipts for expenditure for the year 1931 were only received on 24 October and that he—having a very restricted knowledge of the French language—was authorised to see the Balance sheet as soon as it was definitely fixed by the Accountant, at latest the day before the meeting.²²

On 16 November he booked his passage back to Sydney on *Moldavia* and the same day had a meeting with Leconte, Gaudron and Gayon and another man from New Caledonia. He arrived early for the 9.30am meeting of the *Conseil* on 18 November. 'They have crooked ways of doing things these people' he wrote in his diary at the end of the meeting. He had taken the following, written in English to the meeting:

We are in a very serious financial position which reflects no credit on the *Conseil*. With a debt of between 7 and 8 million francs owing to the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine*, what are we doing to meet the situation? We continue to spend large sums of money in Paris; we send Largeau to New Hebrides at 150,000 Francs per annum and Vibert at what will amount to about the same amount, both of which arrangements are absolutely ridiculous.

We send Dupertuis on some ill-considered scheme and although we may be supposed to receive refund of advances made to Dupertuis, are we optimistic enough to believe that we shall receive any such refund? On the other hand we economise in essential services, such as that of Mr Gayon, which are essential to the good of the *Société*. Mr Gayon absolutely understands the land affairs of the Société, has good standing in official circles in New Hebrides, and is absolutely reliable. This is not the place to economise; our land affairs are too important to leave to present haphazard arrangements.

He then went by train to see Leconte and said 'I may get Leconte to come to the *Assemblée Générale* with me by giving him authority or passing some shares *au porteur* to him for the time being.' He then went back to Rue Scribe to see Raoul-Duval 'about the stupid claim SFNH is putting in for land on Mai [Makapai] as coming from us—land we sold in 1912 ... These Paris double-dealing people make me heartily sick of the place'.

The great day of the General Assembly finally arrived—24 November. According to Kerr's diary:

... nothing much happened to disturb the evil forces controlling. Joyer, after all his talk, had not much to say. The Aupied dictatorship left me out of the nominations for *Conseil*—naturally. In a desperate effort, apparently needlessly, to divert attention from the disastrous administration of Aupied, he trotted out that we misrepresented the number of trees when we sold to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. The object should be quite apparent, after letting the matter sleep for 5 years. I am quite sick of these French people and their 'rotten' methods and feel like just washing my hands of them. Big meeting and many protests but no important move. Decided to get away for London tomorrow.

He had provided a short written report to the Shareholders meeting which said:

I came to Paris entirely at my own expense and consider I have a right to ask Administrators to economise in expenses ... I would suggest that HQ expenditure be cut to a maximum of 150,000 francs per annum, and that of exploitation, under responsible Administrators, to a maximum of 2,500,000 francs per annum, including expenses re land matters and all labour introduction and repatriation. [None of this would be included in the final *process-verbal* of the meeting].

To explain the very great hurt done to Graham Kerr to whom honesty in business was paramount, I now give a free translation of a French extract from the minutes of the above meeting regarding his non-reappointment for a further term on the *Conseil*.²³

Addressing the Shareholders

Mr President [Picanon]: We are not presenting for your ratification the name of Mr Kerr for renomination. It is not an oversight. This was the unanimous decision taken by your *Conseil*, which is only thinking of SFNH's interests. It has considered it first and foremost its duty to clear up the question of the capital value of the properties Mr Kerr sold to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, although Mr Kerr made the rather cynical remark: 'It is too late you are foreclosed'. ['*Il est trop tard, vous êtes forclos.*']²⁴ We hope to act energetically to obtain reparation.

Kerr: It's not true! [In English]

A Shareholder: Would you, Mr President, translate the words of Mr Kerr who claims that what you have pointed out to the meeting is not true. For my part I am fully aware of the question, but perhaps the Assembly is not.

A Director (no name given, probably Aupied): We would have preferred to pass over this question but since you have brought it up we are going to tell you what it concerns. There is a difference of 34 thousand and a few hundred in the number of trees in the sale offer made by Mr Kerr to the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, which did not take up the matter, but the SFNH intends to make it entirely its duty.²⁵

The resolution was unanimously passed with Mr Kerr protesting.

End of extract

André Joyer sent the above to Kerr in London who immediately wrote the following letter on 28 November to President Picanon:

I was astonished on reading the *procès verbal* of the *Conseil* meeting of 18 November [sic he meant 24 November] to find such an inaccurate account of the proceedings as concerns certain matters. I strongly protest against such misrepresentations and demand a record of my protest²⁶.

As regards my note 'non signé' read by Mr Raoul-Duval on which you cast aspersions and about which you, Mr President, remarked on 'the absolute impossibility of all collaboration and all relations as a colleague because of my attitude'.

I now enclose a signed copy of the fearsome note.²⁷

What I do object to and brand an absolute fabrication is where I am declared to have interrupted Monsieur Aupied in these words.

'*Il est trop tard, vous êtes forclos.*' No such words were used by me and in that case what is the object of putting these words in my mouth. What I did say and you may record it if you wish, was 'If Mr Aupied thought there was any misrepresentation [referring to the ancient matter of the tree count as the time of the sale of Properties by Kerr Bros in February 1927] it was his duty to ascertain what he was buying ... The matter has been brought up now, in that it serves as an excuse to get rid of one who objects to the present extravagant administration of the Aupied dictatorship. While it was thought I would be out of the way in Sydney, there was no objection to placing me on the Board but to dare to criticise, that is another matter.'²⁸

Before he left Paris next day he and Leconte arranged to get a safe deposit box together in which Kerr would place his *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shares with Leconte to look after them. Leconte and Vautier, now employed in Paris saw him off next day. Joyer did not know he had gone.

'Glad to leave Paris and I do not care if I never see it again'. His ideas for putting the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on a firm financial footing were completely dashed, his character for honestly viciously impugned, and he was feeling let down that Joyer had not spoken out at the meeting. All this combined to make it imperative that he leave the scene of his defeat immediately. With the world in deep Depression he had arrived in Paris with high hopes that he could turn the failing company in which he held so many shares into a paying concern.

Once in London he 'was glad to be on English soil for a change'.²⁹ He immediately wrote off to Julliens, his Marseilles agents, telling them that he was on his way home and hoped to visit them in Marseilles and that they could destroy the coconut husks he had left with them; 'now of no further use to us'. All his efforts to use every part of the coconut for making boards and coconut cream had come to naught.

It was at this time that he wrote the letter to President Picanon quoted earlier. He also wrote to André Joyer on 26 November telling him that he was in London for a consultation and saying: 'If you are willing to tamely submit to what is going on, I am not. The matter is becoming a veritable scandal'. He needed Joyer's 'good will' and asked if he could provide him with a list of the shareholders of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. He expected to be passing through Paris on his way home and wanted to see him if possible. Joyer replied immediately with a list of the principal shareholders and was looking forward to meeting him on his way through. He ended his letter with his best wishes and sincere support. Graham Kerr did not receive the letter and decided to miss Paris and go all the way by *Moldavia*.

After another nostalgia trip through London to see the places he saw with Muriel and Nancy back in 1929-30 and buying presents for his family, he boarded *Moldavia* at Tilbury 'eager to be on my way home'. They reached Marseilles on 8 December but he did not go ashore, instead posting letters to Julliens, Leconte, Vautier and Joyer and Mme Largeau. But he had earlier written to Julliens from London telling of his plans and hoping to visit them when the ship reached Marseilles and to his surprise and pleasure 'Mr Jullien came on board to see me—he seems a very nice fellow'. And indeed this firm with whom Graham Kerr had such rapport would be a bulwark to him in the years ahead.

On the last day of the year as *Moldavia* was nearing Fremantle, my father penned his last diary entry for the year. 'Not many people will regret the passing of 1932.'

It is useful to know that in the letter from Joyer that did not reach Kerr in London Joyer had in no way deserted him but, as he had more knowledge of what was taking place behind the scenes, he was cautious about the best way to proceed. On 9 December he sent Graham Kerr a copy of the letter he had sent off to him in London on 28 November in which he wrote:

I would very much like to have had some time with you before your return to Australia. I would indeed have strongly advised you to get a lawyer to represent your interests with SFNH.

Although André Joyer had been joint-Director in Paris of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* with Charles Aupied when it was formed in 1927, he was not re-elected to the *Conseil* when that company plus *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* were fused into *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in July 1930, but he was still a shareholder.

His letter continued

I have reason to believe that at the last meeting of the General Assembly of shareholders you were registered by the *Conseil* as voting for its propositions which was certainly not the case.

Using Kerr's term for Aupied, Joyer wrote that 'our dictator' made the reasons for his action all too evident. But in refusing Kerr re-election to the *Conseil* and in the way he did it—by character assassination—he gave Kerr strong reason to protest in Joyer's opinion. He enclosed with his letter a list of the shareholders in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* who controlled most of its shares and a list of the bankers whose clientele held a large number of shares in the fused companies. He ended his letter 'I hold myself at your disposal at any time I might be of use to you'.

On 21 December Joyer sent a copy of the General Assembly meeting of 24 November, as given to the newspapers by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil*, covering the fiscal years 1930 and 1931 which confirmed what he had earlier written about the unanimous vote of all shareholders present, including Graham Kerr.

The meeting was chaired by M. Picanon, who announced:

In spite of numerous difficulties HQ vigorously pursued an energetic policy of cleaning up and rectification. The year 1930 could therefore be considered a year of liquidation of deferred projects, the results of a management about which the present *Conseil* was completely unaware.

He continued:

For 1930 the Assembly of Shareholders gave approval of the management, up to the time of the fusion, to the administrators of SFNH and the Administrators of the three fused companies [the third one was *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides-Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*] with the exception of Messrs Kerr Brothers and Mr Graham Kerr.

Regarding the fiscal year 1931, the article said:³⁰

The president stated precisely that he did not propose the re-election of Mr Kerr whose mandate ended with this meeting. 'This decision', said Mr Picanon 'was taken unanimously by *Conseil* because of the verification made of a difference of at least 34,817 trees in the sale document to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. *Conseil* considers it its duty to clear up this matter and to obtain full reparation.

Mr Germain, Director of Accounts *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, then took over.

The management during the past two years was deficient and this resulted in contracts and onerous engagements which the former companies—now absorbed—had with their workers, and which SFNH was obliged to maintain for the duration of contract. Now these contracts have gone back to a normal level and the management should now find itself in profit.

So, in French newspapers the *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* absolved itself of all wrong-doing and Graham Kerr, designated by name, and the Australian firm of Kerr Brothers were revealed as the guilty ones, ruining a French company, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, now taken over by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which nobly considered it its duty to pursue them for reparations.

Charles Aupied was in the clear and Graham Kerr banished so that he could make no more well-founded accusations. Disgusted and disheartened he was on his way home when Joyer posted it. As released for publication by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil*, the General Assembly of Shareholders on 24 November had given entire and definitive acceptance to their management, up to the date of fusion, to the Administrators of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and to those of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* with the exception of Messrs Kerr Brothers and Mr Graham Kerr.

This resolution wrote Joyer 'was carried unanimously.' The emphasis was his. He ended once again by expressing his very best wishes and holding himself at Kerr's disposal. What nobody yet realised was that Graham Kerr's reputation for honesty in business dealings was vital to him and he would fight to the death to prove it. However if anyone knew what was going on in Paris, and how dangerous it was for my father, an unprotected foreigner and a British one at that, it was André Joyer.

It is sufficient to say at this time that developing plantations to their full potential was the last thing on Aupied's mind. Ever since the setting up of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* in 1924 to sell property claimed by the heirs of John Higginson in the New Hebrides and backed by the French Government, Aupied had been involved at great profit to his own bank balance which he kept secret from everyone but his immediate cronies. This included borrowing from private banks. As well as having been Director of the three fused plantation companies, Charles Aupied had complete control of the *Conseil Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

The son of the Chief Accountant, M. Germain, was married to Aupied's daughter whose dowry had been provided by Aupied from *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* funds. The Head of the Secretarial Staff at Rue Scribe, Mme. Mura, was Aupied's mistress. By paying out 300.000F to M. Tronchon, a shareholder in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and soon to be Director of Registration there, Aupied had the ear of the French Department of Finance and the Minister for Colonies. Joyer sure knew what Kerr was up against.³¹

Meanwhile, Aupied's representative in New Hebrides, Leon Vibert was at work. On 11 August he was provided by the French Consulate in Sydney with a potted history of Kerr Bros. Ltd. starting from 1909 and ending with the new Kerr Bros. Ltd set up in November 1928, mentioning by name all the shareholders and even the exact area covered by the first house and land the family owned in Willoughby, New South Wales in 1909.

Of the Directors, G.L.S. Kerr, who controls affairs, has been connected with the concern for many years past. He is well spoken of as to personal character, said to be steady, energetic and of very fair business qualifications and is generally looked upon as being in a responsible position.

Of the shareholders he stressed that Muriel Kerr 'took no practical part in the management'.

He provided information about the family Solicitors, Perkins, Stevenson and in particular B.W. Perkins:

He is favourably spoken of as to character and habits and said to be of good business ability, while he is credited with being in comfortable circumstances financially.

His concluding paragraph said:

All along it is stated that the business has been conducted on good lines, a steady volume of trade being maintained and it is the opinion that the present company has retained the connection, while future prospects are regarded with favour.

It needs to be realised that the Depression was now causing wide financial depredation so when this was forwarded to Aupied, it gave him the idea that the firm of Kerr Bros and its manager, G.L.S. Kerr, in particular, might well be able to repay some of the 'reparation' that he had so publicly sheeted home to them and so 'virtuously' considered it his duty to extract.

Vibert was back in Paris in late 1932 with a report for Aupied which throws light on 'cleaning up' of uneconomical practices in the New Hebrides of which *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* apparently knew nothing and which originated from the time *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* was a separate company. In fact Vibert was getting rid of people who knew too much of what his own mismanagement had caused.

Vibert had arrived in Vila on 25 July 1932 accompanied by M. Déchery and went immediately to the Accounts Department where Rohr and Denis were working. Vibert said 'We gave immediate instructions for an inventory of all archives to be drawn up. These were to be packed up at once. They next visited Fernand Largeau 'who received us with good grace and with whom we at once proceeded to the cancellation of his job as far as the plantation at Téouma [headquarters of one of the fused plantation companies, *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté*] and rented premises in Vila were concerned'. These last were where Rohr and Denis worked. Vibert said:

Largeau at the cancellation of his job, showed his habitual manner, that is to say an appearance of friendliness, hiding very evident ill-will. I did what was necessary to save his self-esteem, and I did it above all in the interests of our company. I represented it to him as exclusively due to his state of health.

Vibert told Aupied that he had acted thus 'to serve your interests'. It has to be realised that at that time Largeau was again ill with cancer. He wanted to return to France via Sydney to visit the doctor to whom my father had taken him for his first operation. He left Vila on *Laperouse* for Noumea without a send-off or any show of friendliness or concern. Vibert 'contented himself by paying him 2.500F a month up to 31 July plus a ticket via Panama'. He did not think Largeau's need to see his doctor was a good enough reason for him to travel via Sydney. The truth was that the trip to France via Panama took longer. Moreover Vibert did not want Largeau visiting Kerr Bros Office in Sydney so that news could reach Graham Kerr who was anxiously awaiting his arrival in Paris. Largeau's deeply concerned wife was told nothing of his movements.

Vibert himself was responsible from the very beginning for the abandonment of whole areas of plantations to bush but he was not going to take the blame. Largeau was supposed to sign a paper attesting to these areas which he refused to do. 'I should add here in all truth', wrote Vibert, 'that M. Largeau has led here a campaign of calumny against SFNH unworthy of a simply honest man and it will need time and much calmness to efface the very bad impression that this man has left here'.

This is interesting because Vibert was the one who left the bad impression not Largeau, who was well known and trusted by his fellow citizens in the New Hebrides. Even the French part of the Condominium Government was wary of what Vibert was doing.

When it came to the sacking of Rohr, Vibert was warned by the lawyer, Louis Jourdan not to use the 'grave fault' clause especially as his contract had such a short time to run.³² 'No court', he said 'and above all that at Port Vila, would allow it. If you lose the case, you risk having to pay damages'.

Vibert decided to give Rohr six months notice depositing to his account (as a bribe) certain sums, he said, that Rohr had paid himself since the fall in English currency, which Vibert knew were not part of his contract payment. Déchery drew up the receipt and Rohr verified it 'pocketed it, buttoned his jacket and left with the receipt in his hand'. Intrigued, Vibert followed him to his office. After some hesitation Rohr signed it and attached it 'under reserve' to the money given him by Vibert, calling on Déchery and two Tonkinese office workers to witness what he was doing. According to Vibert, after he asked Denis to call the bailiff, Rohr 'overcome by fear' restored the money he had been given and left.

The same evening Vibert was advised that a chest of documents had been removed and placed in the care of a servant at the home of Mme. Berut, which news was confirmed by Jourdan. Following Jourdan's advice they reported the matter to M. Calotti, the acting [sic] French Resident Commissioner, in the absence of M. Casimir in France. Calotti refused to intervene.

A police officer, acting in the job of Public Prosecutor 'showed himself to be less circumspect' wrote Vibert and went with them to Mme. Berut's house where she confirmed that Rohr had left a chest of documents for her to look after. On being asked, Rohr admitted they were accounting documents. Vibert painted Rohr as 'stammering out an excuse'. According to him, Rohr handed over the documents on being told that if he did so no complaint would be lodged. He was then paid the money that was really owed him, and Rohr renounced his and his wife's return-fares to France.

Vibert had gained himself a mortal enemy. The accounting documents Rohr had taken revealed that Vibert was as good as his boss in Paris, Aupied, at misappropriating money. The fact that the Acting [sic] French Resident refused to involve himself in the matter was significant.

Having settled in Port Vila all the matters in progress, packed up the 'rewards' of July [the sacking of Rohr and the taking back of the latter's incriminating evidence against him], I [Vibert] organised a real-estate business where the Vila Accounting Branch had been.

Vibert went north to Santo on 16 August where he commenced an examination of the staff of the plantation properties taken over by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in 1930, including Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu. Philippe de Vomécourt, Director of the Canal Centre, Segond, was one of the position's he decided to get rid of. He was to be 'replaced by a less expensive person'.

As for the Accounting Branch now to be set up at Surunda when M. Dennis's 'contract runs out', wrote Vibert 'although well-intentioned [his employment] does not give us the desirable security'. The fact that

Denis and Rohr had worked together might well have been the problem. Ballandes who had a permanent seat on the *Conseil* in Paris were to be asked through their Noumea manager M. Milliard to provide one.

Throughout the report Vibert disparaged the work Largeau had been doing to put things right, referring back to the time of Pinelli—who had been recalled as incapable of doing the job—but Vibert thought Pinelli had the right idea.

Vibert was known throughout the Group as completely incapable of running a plantation but in this report all his mistakes are handed on to somebody else. In the case of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu

... ten of the 130 hectares of the land abandoned to bush on the plateau by M. de Vomécourt will be resumed and planted with coffee before his departure.

... de Vomécourt made trouble when Pascal came to replace him and put it all down to his predecessor ... Labour is far from doing its job and its use is badly apportioned. The coconut plantation levelled flat has occupied a considerable number of labourers.³³

Vibert made great mention of bad seasons causing the poor supply of produce under his management. The report from which I have quoted ended with Vibert telling Aupied of the very important economies he could bring about with Aupied's aid.³⁴

A letter written by de Vomécourt from Turtle Bay to Graham Kerr in Paris on 29 July 1932 presents a somewhat different picture. De Vomécourt had just returned from Hog Harbour plantation where he saw Robbie who was then managing it for the Kerrs.

Robertson may have written to you mentioning that I was having a tiff with Monsieur Largeau about internal workings. These have been put on a good footing. But low [sic] and behold, enter Monsieur Vibert as big boss, much to people's surprise and I must say dismay, for his reputation, true or false, stinks of swindle ... He is due here by the boat that is taking this letter. Rumour says he is sacking me. In any case I agreed with him on at least one point. I want to go. So will have no trouble, I hope, in parting company.³⁵

He asked my father if he knew of any jobs he could recommend. Perhaps a quote from a book about Paris in the 1930s will throw light on what de Vomécourt was returning to in France, and the unstable mess in which Graham Kerr had inadvertently become involved. By the end of 1932 the Depression was really taking hold in France.

From June 3rd 1932 to February 6th 1934—a period of 20 months, 6 Cabinets held office, some for less than four weeks. One after the other the leaders of the Radicals tried and failed to govern France. Herriot; their ally Paul-Boncour; Daladier; Sarraut; Chautemps; Daladier again—all unable to solve the triple problem, budget deficit; rapid rise in unemployment, and the dramatic fall in industrial production and commodity prices.

On 14 December 1932, just after Kerr had left Paris in disgust, one of these Cabinets fell:

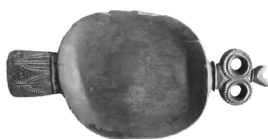
One Radical succeeded the next, not a single problem was solved—the country got angrier week by week.³⁶

Endnotes

- 1 See Yellow Folder No.9. History of the Vysuck Estate. Letters dated 1 Feb and 10 March 1932. In 1913 all Kerr Bros' land claims were prepared by their solicitor Edward Jacomb and lodged in the Joint Court to wait the obligatory year for counter claims to be made. The First World War intervened; the Land Claims part of the Joint Court closed down and only reopened in 1927 and these early claims could be seen there. My father had warned the buyers of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu in Jan 1927 that no land claims for property in the New Hebrides had been settled at that time and that they would have to take up the matter with the Joint Court. SFNH never seemed happy with this arrangement but said nothing to him at the time.
- 2 See White Envelope No.11. Land claim papers including Makapai. This he could not do as the present Kerr Bros. Ltd. was a different one from the Kerr Bros. Ltd that sold Turtle Bay in 1927 and which went legally into liquidation in Nov 1928. He sent a signed and witnessed statement by himself and Agnes Kerr—the liquidator of the first Kerr Bros. Ltd.—to Wallace, giving the history of Makapai's white ownership: firstly Colin Munroe, then C.H. Cronstedt who sold it to Auguste Lauppe who died in 1908. The property sold in 1912 at public auction by order of the French National Court and bought by Kerr Bros. Ltd. by a deed of 10 July 1912, the first Kerr Bros. Ltd. sold the property to two native chiefs of the Island of Mai. In 1915, as the chiefs had not completed the payment, it was agreed that Kerr Bros. could occupy the property until 31 Oct 1923, then handing it over to the chiefs. This was done on the above date, making it quite impossible for Kerr Bros to have sold it to CGFH in 1927. Makapai was never mentioned among the properties on sale at that time. The signed statement continued that the original Conveyance to CGFH which my father signed on 28 Aug 1928—before he noticed Makapai's wrongful inclusion—was repudiated by CGFH when they said his Power-of-Attorney had expired. 'A new Conveyance was prepared by CGFH and sent to Sydney for execution. This was duly executed under seal, superseding the [first] document... having been refused by CGFH themselves, now being apparently used by them for their own ends. That document, having been superseded by a properly executed conveyance, is absolutely repudiated by Kerr Bros. Ltd and G.L.S. Kerr'. The new legal one was signed by Audoin for CGFH at the British Residence on 11 Oct 1928. My father told Wallace on 10 March that CGFH 'may have other rightful claim to the land in question but emphatically none through K.B. Ltd'. He added that he could not send Wallace the receipt of sale from the native chiefs as that Kerr Bros was officially wound up in 1929. Instead he sent the signed and witnessed statement I have quoted from above, a copy of which I own. In their later persecution and prosecution of my father the French would completely disregard the 11 Oct 1928 conveyance, using the repudiated 28 Aug one instead.
- 3 See Yellow Folder No. 9 History of the Vysuck Estate.
- 4 Entry 7 March 1932, my father's 1932 diary.
- 5 The above is a rough translation of part of a letter Sec. General SFNH to Kerr 24 March 1932 found in 71 *APC, SFNH. Serie II. Administrateurs—Kerr, Outre Mer* Archives, Paris in 1983. See Folder 10 arranged in chronological order. Other relevant letters, dated 28 Jan, 17 Feb, 23 and 24 Feb 1932 are also to be found here.
- 6 71 *APC SFNH Serie II*, Nos 116-117, *Affaire Kerr*. My father found later that the French Consul in Sydney was instructed to enquire into his affairs. Surely such an order could only have come from the French Government? See Paris Notebook No. 2, p. 14.
- 7 See Paris Notebook No. 1, p. 70.
- 8 This letter translated into French was found in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris in 71 *APC, SFNH. Serie 2. No. 29. Administrateur—Kerr*.
- 9 The source is the same as the previous endnote. Many years later my father met Maurice Gayon in Noumea and thinking he was still with SFNH asked for help. Gayon replied that he had refused to have anything to do with SFNH while Aupied was in charge.
- 10 See Paris Notebook No.1 pp. 72-73.
- 11 All the quotations since my father's arrival in Paris are from his 1932 diary.
- 12 See Folder 10. Xerox dated 11 Aug 1932, obtained by me from *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris in 1983.
- 13 See Orange clipped Folder No. 2 Letters Kerr/Jullien 1932-1940 in the possession of the author (NLA Archive Box 19).
- 14 Australia officially went off the Gold standard in 1931.
- 15 See Folder No. 10. Xeroxes obtained from *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris in 1983, dated 27 April and 9 Sept 1932.
- 16 See Paris Notebook No.1, p. 73.
- 17 See Orange Clipped Folder No. 2. Jullien Letter File 1932-1940.
- 18 See Folder No. 10 Xerox obtained by me in 1983 from the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris dated 15 Sept 1932.
- 19 In his list he expanded a little on Mme Mura. She was 'Secretary or something of the kind and chief of Staff under Aupied'. Against Raoul-Duval's name my father also wrote 'Admirer and follower of Aupied'.
- 20 See White Envelope No. 3. Cote 17.
- 21 See Folder No. 10 Xeroxes from *Outre Mer* archives obtained by me in Paris in 1983.

- 22 See Paris Notebook No. 1. pp. 74-75.
- 23 Found in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris 71 APC SFNH Serie II No. 29. *Administrateurs—Kerr*. See Folder 10 Xeroxes plus translations dated 8, 21, 24 and 28 Nov which includes a letter in English to M. Picanon, President of SFNH protesting at the inaccuracy of the process verbal of the meeting of 18 Nov in which he was reported as saying '*c'est trop tard. Vous etes forclos*' which was an 'absolute fabrication'. A signed copy dated 18 Nov in English of what my father had actually given Raoul-Duval dealing with the serious financial position of the SFNH was included. The latter had deliberately manipulated the special clause of the Deed-of-Sale of the properties in 1927 to show the rest of the shareholders the dishonest man with whom they were dealing. See also my father's 1932 diary; 18-24 Nov 1932.
- 24 This is absolutely ridiculous. The bi-lingual Raoul Duval, who was in with Aupied, had deliberately altered what my father had asked him to translate to make him seem to be crowing at the 'trick' he had played. What he did say, in English, is exactly what he would have said, his knowledge of French being what it was. I am sure the shareholders really wanted to know what he had said but my father was powerless to correct it. His anger may well have been read by the shareholders as guilt.
- 25 Included was the count made by Vibert and Audoin and altered several times, dated May 1928. This count D.H. Kerr refused to attend as it was not part of the agreement made by G. Kerr when he sold Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations to Aupied and Joyer on 7 Feb 1927. They had been given 3 months option to check all immoveable objects which included trees, for themselves, before accepting the option, the final clause of which was that the buyers 'take all the properties at present ceded in the state they are found when entering into possession'. The contrary count was taken after the option was taken up and my father did his best to accommodate the contrary finding offering generous concessions although the production figure which was never questioned. It could not possibly have resulted from the tree-count his opponents gave. The only legal obligation the Kerr's had, which they kept, was an inventory of moveable objects at the final hand-over. See chaps. 1927, 1928.
- 26 Found in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris 71 APC SFNH Serie II No. 29. *Administrateurs—Kerr*. See Folder 10 Xeroxes plus translations dated 8, 21, 24 and 28 Nov
- 27 Here it is in French—the actual 'special condition' at the end of the *Acte de Vente* 1927 Turtle Bay: '*Conditions particulières. Elle prendra tous les biens présentement cédés dans l'état ou ils se trouverai net le jour de l'entrée en jouissance.*' Raoul-Duval who was a fluent English speaker and no friend of my father turned this into '*C'est trop tard, vous etes forclos.*' This clause was what really worried Aupied and his followers as it put my father in the clear. The shareholders knew nothing so, for Raoul-Duval to twist so cleverly what he read into the cynical, 'It is too late you are foreclosed' presented a picture of a dishonest man and a foreigner at that, who was gloating at the trick he had put over their company. The only truthful part of the *procès* was my father's angry comment 'It's not true'. His lack of French and his anger at the slick comment in French put in his mouth by Raoul-Duval perhaps disposed his audience to believe him guilty.
- 28 Raoul-Duval had been given special privileges by Aupied in which Tiby Hagen of *Etablissements Hagen* was involved. It was notable that during the long years of my father's persecution from Paris, where other French settlers in New Hebrides spoke up for him, Tiby Hagen remained silent.
- 29 He said later that he had hoped for consultation in London, though he did not say with whom. I think perhaps it was with Edward Jacomb with his first-hand knowledge of both British and French law. Jacomb however had abandoned law and was now studying medicine and probably not in London anyway. My father was certainly in a dangerous situation versus the French Government via certain members of the SFNH *Conseil* because of his revelations of financial corruption. Also it was common knowledge that his own British part of the Condominium Government of New Hebrides was not noted for standing up for the rights of British subjects versus the French, however strong their cause, which would not have disposed his opponents to show caution.
- 30 See Orange Clipped Folder No. 1. Joyer Letter File 21 Dec 1932.
- 31 This comes from a detailed confidential report of evidence given before a Commission of Enquiry on SFNH and sent by Joyer to my father in early 1935. Joyer told my father what he himself had told the Commission in a letter dated 22 Dec 1934. Part of what was revealed to the Commission was based on the accusations of H. Rohr, the accountant dismissed by Vibert in 1932, in a letter he sent to the *Procureur de la Republique* [Public Prosecutor] *Palais de Justice*, Paris Dec 1934, which lead to questions on the floor of Parliament; also to a letter written by Joyer and Vereecken to the French Minister for Colonies in Dec 1931; and lastly on my father's accusations of Nov 1932 and his letter to the Minister for Colonies in Feb 1933.
- 32 Jourdan, a lawyer of bad reputation had earlier received a jail sentence in Marseilles for malpractice. He came to New Hebrides in 1929 as a 'business man' but did not remain there. See Hébridais p.114. Vibert's Report is at Appendix 4.
- 33 See PMB No. 50. Robertson, William Torrie. Planter Big Bay and Hog Harbour. Papers 1927-1960. Included is a signed declaration by Robertson that sometime after Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu were handed over to Vibert in 1927 'I personally saw some fields of cacao entirely neglected and returned to bushland. Large areas planted with young coconut trees were destroyed by the cattle after the fences were removed by the orders of Mr Vibert'.

- 34 See White Envelope No. 3 for Report of Leon Vibert, plus Analysis of Courier received from New Hebrides 24 Oct 1932. I have used free English translation of parts of this thirteen page report. A translation of Vibert's Report is at Appendix 4.
- 35 See Clarence Letter File. Letters. Philippe de Vomécourt to G.L.S. Kerr. 29 July 1932 and 24 May 1933. De Vomécourt visited our home in Sydney in 1930, on his way to the New Hebrides to work for SFNH. My parents did all they could to make him feel welcome. I remember hearing him airing his English to my Mother who had asked if he had a family. Yes, a son, who is 'half past twelve' came the answer. It has stuck in my head probably because at 'half past twelve' myself at that time, I had not yet begun to learn French at school and was intrigued.
- 36 Bernier, Oliver *Fireworks at dusk: Paris in the Thirties*. Boston, Little, Brown and Co. 1993, p, 103 and 106; two quotations.



Chapter 15 1933: The Ruthless French Vow Revenge

Graham Kerr arrived back in Sydney on 12 January. We were all there to meet him. Nancy my youngest sister aged four getting special mention. ‘Nancy recognised me when I got near to the wharf’. He was ‘very glad to be home—Sydney Harbour and the Bridge looked wonderful coming in this morning’. The Bridge had been opened for use since March 1932. The same day he took us all to Clifton Gardens in the Chevrolet in the evening, returning home via the Bridge.

My father outwardly seemed to have forgotten the unpleasantness he had met in Paris, but he hadn’t. This is well illustrated in his ‘driven’ manner and material I later found in his archive. Much of the material in this chapter comes from his 1933 diary.



Photo 47: The Chevrolet with Graham Kerr behind; Len, Muriel (Gem) and Katherine Kerr seated along the running board of the car; and Margaret Kerr in the car just above Katherine (taken in 1932 or 33). No longer at Osborne, Katherine was at North Sydney Girls High School, Gem (Muriel) at Wenona School, Margaret, briefly at Wenona, was moved in 1933 to a Domestic Science School in Mosman she did not wish to attend, and Len was at North Sydney Boys’ Grammar School, Shore. This photograph would have been taken by Muriel Kerr in the morning before Graham Kerr dropped each child off at school.

It is important to explain that, although we six children, the four eldest being girls, went everywhere on picnics and family visits with him as if we were a close-knit family, we four teenagers did not feel that way at all.¹ My compliant mother had a light touch which my father loved and this held the family together.

He was always on the move. Quiet contemplation was no part of his life and there was never real to-and-fro communication with his children which would have developed our confidence in our right to have ideas of our own and our willingness to share his. We were not supposed to have opinions. This lack of give-and-take on both sides was his loss too. If he could have unburdened himself to us about some of the frustration that led to his frenetic activity this would have helped him put things in perspective and given us some understanding of his difficulties.



Photo 48: The Kerr children at Kermadec 1933: Joyce (19), Gem (Muriel, 16-17), Katherine (15), Margaret (13), Len (10): taken by Muriel Kerr.

Our Australian friends' fathers were not always on the defensive as he was, but then they did not earn their livings in the New Hebrides. We felt different and if that was what New Hebrides did to you, we wanted none of it. Of course we did not and could not give voice to our thoughts, so we just closed our ears to what he said.

It was not until long after his death that a new idea of him, unspoilt by the ranting that put us offside through our teen years, led me to write these books.

Both the Kerr brothers were now in Sydney but on 24 January it was decided that D.H. Kerr should go and see what was happening at Hog Harbour.

On 28 January Tiby Hagen called into the office, the diary does not give any explanation. Louis Ancelin had visited him at the office the previous day.² The de Vomécourts with their two children, one a newborn baby, were now in Sydney on their way back to France and my father collected de Vomécourt and his young son and brought them home to dinner. His wife was not well and remained at the hotel with the baby. There was no mention of de Vomécourt's dismissal by Vibert. My father saw the family off to France on 6 February.

On Saturday 11 February, he put in the afternoon at the office 'preparing a Statement for the French Government regarding SFNH', of which much more later on. After that, and there are many diary entries on the same subject, he took my two elder sisters and his sister Agnes Kerr to a quiet spot to give them driving lessons—a difficult feat in those days when there were no synchromesh gears and probably few professional driving instructors. His sister would finally end up with her own car, a Wolseley Hornet, 1933 model. She would have to go out for a few trips with a 'tutor' before she went up for her 'ticket'.

On 25 February: 'Young Mark Reynolds who applied for position at Hog Harbour came in to see us'—Graham and Agnes Kerr interviewed him—'Seems a likely young fellow—we liked his getting on to do anything, working in an orchard rather than remaining in Sydney doing nothing'. This was the Depression and jobs very scarce. They decided to send him 'a copy of the usual agreement and, if he is satisfied, for him to report to Sydney'. Reynolds was apparently satisfied and left for the Islands on 9 March.

On 27 February my father and Agnes went to hear a lecture by Miss Beatrice Taylor at the Friendly Society in Sydney:

Miss Taylor speaking of her visit to Russia and showing lantern slides of life there—very interesting.

Like many at that time Graham Kerr thought that Stalin held the answer to the World's problems. His three sisters, Mary, Agnes and Kate who had visited Russia in 1930 were much more circumspect

in their views but could not convince my father to moderate his more idealist ones. Of all the things that most put his children off having to go on visits to his family was the cacophony of voices raised as they discussed politics and religion—all probably in agreement although it did not sound like that to us. My mother's much more easy-going family left those controversial subjects alone but then her family was not directly involved in a place where differing racial, political, and religious views were constantly on display.

During these months my father dropped us off at our various schools on his way to work, where he attended to clients and their needs plus cargo to be unloaded and distributed and more got ready for the return trip when ships from the Islands arrived, which was about every second week. If business was slow he even dug our garden and planted vegetables with the help of Ray Ball from the office. He also saw that the firm's seaside cottage at Dee Why was in good condition for tenants, delivered the car to various places for attention, and nearly every weekend there was a picnic with carloads of friends and relations to various spots round Sydney, a great favourite being the 'Playground' near Warwick Farm which was attractive bushland with nearby vineyards in those far-off days. The firm even considered buying land in that area.

On 20 March he received mail from D.H. Kerr at Hog Harbour that he had had

... to get rid of both Evans and Robertson, who seem to have been carrying on a 'nice little game'. Dupertuis has been taken on until we can further consider the situation.³

The way East Santo Plantations was run was never going to be success, with mostly untrained employees coming and going, and no family member on hand to provide continuity, or an atmosphere of 'home'. Successfully-run plantations were centred round a resident family like that of Jean My, his wife and mother at Shark Bay south of Hog Harbour. They were also shareholders in East Santo Plantations. At least Dupertuis had a wife and young daughter, so perhaps things would now be better. These were not easy times and my father and his brother were not able to create from afar a situation where good employees felt that their work was appreciated.

It was dawning on the firm of Kerr Brothers that buying Hog Harbour in 1928, when angered by the underhand methods used by their so-called French partners to undercut them, had been a bad mistake. The 17,000 pounds sterling spent in the process was money that could have been used to better account elsewhere. This was on a par with being inveigled into taking shares in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* centred on Turtle Bay. The original idea had been to divest themselves of all property in the New Hebrides and run the Island Merchant Business from Sydney. If that idea had been adhered to, this story would have been very different.

Sydney on 31 March saw the end of the firm's financial year and a move into a new office on the second floor of the same building. D.H.

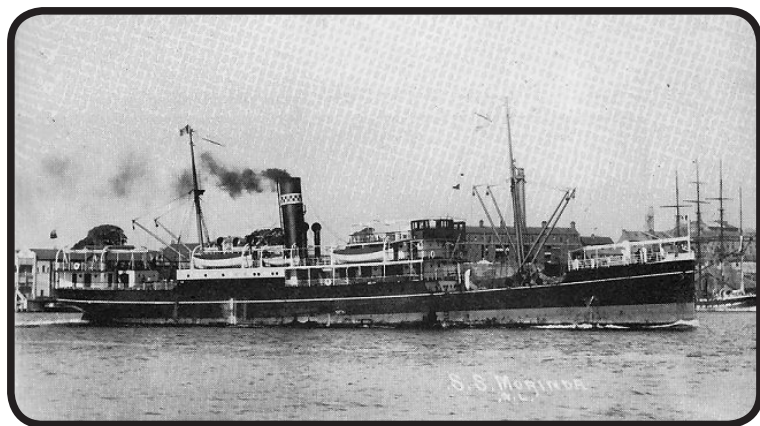


Photo 49: *Morinda*, from the database <http://www.ro-klinger.de/NH/1-phship.htm> image thanks to the book *The Main Line Fleet of Burns Philp* by Wilkinson/Wilson, Canberra 1981'.

Kerr arrived back from New Hebrides on *Laperouse* on 10 April. All the diary had to say was that they discussed East Santo Plantation matters with their sisters. Dupertuis was now in charge.

On 3 May Graham Kerr called on Dr Poate on behalf of Mme. Largeau to find out the condition of Fernand Largeau when he underwent the operation for cancer in 1931. She was probably trying to get compensation following his abrupt dismissal by Vibert.

On 16 May 1933 he visited Mrs Bell in Strathfield 'after the sad loss of her husband in New Hebrides'. William Lockhart Bell, a long-time friend dating from the 1890s had, like Graham Kerr, settled his wife and family in Sydney while he earned their living in New Hebrides working for the Condominium Government as British Collector of Customs.

It was now Graham Kerr's turn to go and see what was going on at East Santo Plantations and we all saw him off on *Morinda* on 13 July. 'Nancy very worried with the steamer blowing her whistle'. Life did not slow down when they arrived in Vila on 21 July. 'Went ashore early and called on various people on business'. These included his lawyer F.E. Wallace, regarding Annie Petersen's property, and Sir George Joy the British Resident, on the same matter. He also visited Fricotte the boat builder; Mme. Reid who ran Hotel Reid; Frouin; Albert Jocteur; Hoarau; and Customs to pay dues. He also tried unsuccessfully to see Des Granges, French lawyer to the Joint Court, before the ship left for the north.

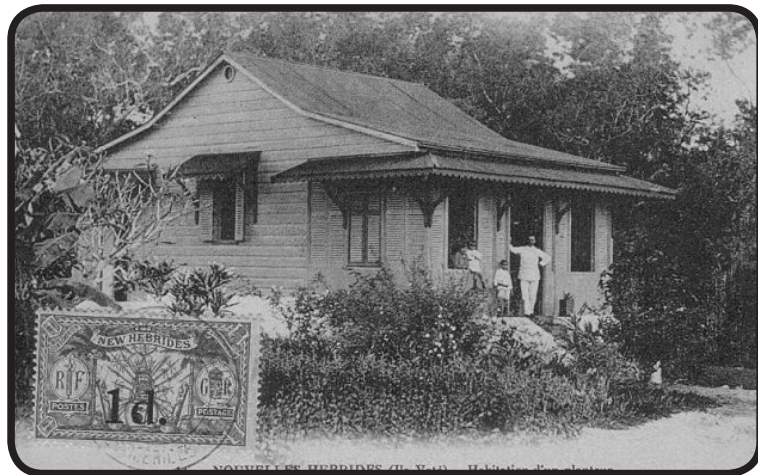


Photo 50: Frouin's House in New Hebrides, 'unused postcard 11 October 1924 PCH type 7—a typical souvenir item in these times. [This was the house of Monsieur Frouin and maybe he is standing in the door.] ("SeSi" coll.)' Source The New Hebrides: Postal History and Stamps; <http://www.ro-klinger.de/NH/1-ph1920.htm>.

Kerr wrote, on 22 July 'at daylight *Morinda* was between Epi and Malekula... very sad passing this place'. A laconic reference to something my father could never forget or cease blaming himself for—the death of his first child, Jean aged 16 months when *Tathra* on her way to Sydney foundered there in a hurricane in January 1912. I have mentioned earlier that this tragedy went so deep that my parents could never bring themselves to discuss it with their children and I only found out the details from official records when researching for the Kerr Brothers books.⁴

At Bushman's Bay he went ashore to see F.J Fleming with whom he played tennis in the afternoon.⁵ 'The shore people [came] on board in the evening to a dance on deck—left for Aoba before midnight'. They reached Segond channel, Dart Anchorage, on 23 July where he expected to find *Toa* down from Hog harbour to meet him. She was not there but his good friend Auguste Houchard kindly offered to send him up to Hog Harbour in his vessel skippered by his son Louis.⁶ When they arrived at Hog Harbour he found that Dupertuis, the current manager had gone down to Segond with Anderson on 22 July. He wrote

Strange he did not come on board—he must have been at Ratard's.

After having some tea got sorted up [my father could not bear mess of any sort] and had a look around. They are preparing coconuts for Sydney, so I am putting them right on preparation. The Dupertuises, Reynolds and Francois are all well—getting my bearings and taking notes.⁷

The next day he paid attention to the coconuts for Sydney, the unsuitable ones being put on one side for copra.

In the afternoon, Dupertuis arrived overland, having come by foot from Surunda. He was rather in a state on learning that I was there.

Surunda was Vibert's headquarters. Was he fraternising with the enemy? This might well have been what Graham Kerr was thinking. Never one to sit back when work was on hand, he ran the big truck while Francois ran the small one only bringing in suitable nuts to send away to Sydney, *Laperouse* was expected at any time to collect them. He found the blue flower pest growing among the coconut palms, making it very difficult to collect the nuts. A clean-up was indicated. Also the roads were awful, 'not formed anywhere'. If any place needed full-time consistent management it was Hog Harbour plantation. He also knew first hand that defective nuts would not find a buyer in Sydney, especially in a tight market.

Laperouse came in on 30 July.

Captain came ashore—got my mail—all cargo ashore and produce shipped before dark ... we all went on board for dinner... left the ship by 11pm and she got away by about midnight.

Dinner on board ships not only provided the latest news but entertainment for otherwise isolated people. On 31 July, a Monday, Salisbury the British Condominium Agent on Santo invited Kerr to lunch.

Dupertuis also there—a long drawn-out affair—too late to do much when we got back.

Trouble was in the offing. In Graham Kerr's opinion long-drawn-out luncheons were not the thing for a working day, and sure enough, next day he took Dupertuis, Reynolds, and Francois 'round ... on a tour of inspection—pointed out defects and slipshod methods used'. Some of them he attributed to Robertson, a much more easy-going person than himself, and not the owner of the property, which was rather run-down when taken over from the Thomas family. Kerr was trying 'to get a little order out of chaos'.

He then tackled the books which had to be completely in order and up to date before he left to return to Sydney. On 5 August he, Dupertuis, and Pascal left for Segond Channel in *Toa* to visit Ratard and others on business.⁸ Before returning to Hog Harbour they visited de Sonnevile and saw the French doctor as my father was having trouble with his eyes. They had intended to visit the Mazoyers, the Deplanques and Jules Douyere but something went wrong with *Toa's* magneto chain and they had to return to Ratard's where it could be fixed.⁹ 'The Dedieus kindly asked [him] to stay the night. We went ashore to dinner and [he] slept ashore.'¹⁰

The Ratard family had a poignant connection with the Kerrs of many years standing—having lost family members in the sinking of the *Tathra* in January 1912 too¹¹—and while at Segond Graham Kerr and Paulin Ratard went for a long ride through the Ratard plantation:

We saw over his electric power generating station—he dammed water up and uses the overflow to generate his electricity which he uses for light and power—he has to carry it by wire something like two miles.¹²

They did not get back to Hog Harbour until 10 August when *Oronsay* arrived as expected with 'something like 600 passengers on a cruise'. He went off in *Père Audouin's* launch in the afternoon to visit the ship which he described as magnificent.¹³ He had himself a haircut on board and was invited to stay for dinner by one of the passengers with dancing afterwards. Dancing was a very favourite relaxation of my father's—much better than the give and take of conversation during a leisurely luncheon, especially when one was supposed to be working. That long lunch still preoccupied him.

On 12 August, Dupertuis and Graham Kerr left for Sakau, an island lying off the eastern tip of Santo at 4 am in *Toa* skippered by Francois. They arrived soon after daylight. They had bought over rations for the labour as well as trade from the Hog Harbour store.

Had a look round the plantation, including cacao on top; everything looking very well.

They then left for Port Olry to visit Auguste Harbulot.¹⁴

Had a look round his plantation—he has a big place but not set up with any facilities for handling and treating produce—we had *dejeuner* with him.

Père Audouin came to collect them in his launch and took them across to the French Mission Station at Port Olry where *Toa* was waiting for them. By 16 August Kerr was really having problems with Dupertuis. In the afternoon, following a morning with the books, Kerr

... gave a hand with the big truck. Dupertuis, I am afraid, is something of a 'wash-out' ... he is a poor organiser.

On 18 August 'the Belgian yacht *Heliopolis*—Comte John Empain—came in. Dupertuis off in the evening'. The next day a party from the yacht went up to some of the native villages in the morning. 'The Count in to see us during the afternoon, wants us to go on board this evening'. Kerr was not one of them, perhaps because Dupertuis was. If only he could have unbent and stopped his everlasting work even briefly, but that was not his temperament.

Instead he started to break in a horse, something he was very good at, posted up native accounts at the store for August and supervised some of the women in a cleanup of a 'terrible accumulation of rubbish' around the house grounds. He even helped with the work himself to make sure it was done, and after that had enough energy for a game of tennis. Gordon Inskip, who did not seem to be working on the plantation at this time, came round for tennis, dinner, music and cards. 'Salisbury was coming but has been ill the last few days'.

Things became more tense when Graham Kerr started to overhaul the store and found the stock 'all kept very badly', and, in the afternoon of 28 August, he 'went along to see how the nut-preparing was going—there is no doubt Dupertuis is a perfect "dud" as far as organising any work is concerned—hopeless muddle'. He ran the big truck for a while and 'told Dupertuis how to organise the particular work going on'. He concluded 'there must be 50% waste labour'. They were getting ready to ship coconuts to Sydney when *Morinda* would arrive. *Toa*, which had been out recruiting, came in on 1 September with 7 men and 2 women. 'They are 7 from Maewo, 1 from Pentecost—the Maewo and Pentecost lot are very good'. On 4 September he left in *Toa* for Shark Bay to visit his partners in East Santo Plantations, the Mys at Shark Bay, looking in on Pilotin Island on the way.

6 September was very busy day with 14 labourers due to be returned home by *Toa* being paid off. Nearly all the money paid out came back in purchases they made at the Store before embarking which pleased Kerr, and probably also pleased the purchasers, as money, as such, meant little to them.

It was now that he had words with Dupertuis and his daughter 'a pert brat of a girl, 12 years old, interfering in plantation matters—putting a stop to it'.¹⁵

He then became involved in making roads on the plantation—'transport is quite a problem in wet weather. There has been no attempt to form any roads'. After putting in a whole day actively engaged on road building, he wrote that he was 'very tired'. He was almost 60. Things came to a head on 13 September when he gave Dupertuis notice:

He is impossible—the final came when he countermanded some instructions I had given to Pascal ... he is blaming Reynolds ... Dupertuis is no loss and it had to come very soon.

Dupertuis was paid off the next day and Kerr said it was a 'trying day'.

Gordon Inskip was now staying on the plantation and about to become resident manager. The situation was difficult because, if Graham Kerr wanted the plantation to work under the system he set up, he needed to be on hand all the time to see things were carried out. This was impossible as he was needed to run the firm in Sydney. His brother, D.H. Kerr, no longer liked plantation life and would only be available in an emergency and Kerr's only son was still a child of 11. He did have a daughter

aged 20 but in those days, even if she had been interested, plantation management would not have been considered suitable work for a woman.

Rain was now falling after a dry spell and many of the staff and labour, including Inskip, went down with fever so Graham Kerr had to take charge of arranging the work of the labourers himself. Reynolds was given the job of attending to the sick ones. One bright spot was the return of *Toa* and Francois on 22 September from a successful 15 day recruiting trip with 20 recruits. Graham Kerr was very pleased as 'there are many to go home in September, October, November, and December—first lot will be a batch of 9 to the West Coast of Santo this month'. East Santo Plantations at this time did not need to employ foreign labour. To Kerr, Francois was worth his weight in gold as a recruiter of Indigenous labour.

He was now busy showing Inskip how to manage labour and supervising Reynolds, for whom he had a soft spot. He took him over to Sakau with him in *Toa* on 26 September where they 'found a nice little bay on the North side, absolutely protected from all wind except North and North West, anchored in absolutely smooth water with a good broken coral bottom'. He thought the passage might need a little blowing out with dynamite for low water use. When Robertson took over Hog Harbour, which included Sakau, for Kerr Brothers in 1927 he had, without consultation, started a new plantation on the other side of the island, two and a half miles from this bay, with 'very poor anchorage ... [a boat] could never lie there overnight'.

Thomas had been trying to sell out since 1924 and had consequently put all development on hold. Sakau became, in Graham Kerr's mind, the ideal place for a plantation for cacao and coffee on the plateau which formed the centre of the island and for coconuts on the seashore. He named the little bay Kermadec Bay after our home in Sydney.

They collected '6 Santo men who have finished their time' and took them back to the mainland. After doing some business with Houchard at Port Olry and calling in on *Père* Audouin at the Mission, they returned to Hog Harbour. Nine more labour were paid off next day, *Toa* delivering them home to the west coast of Santo. Apparently the horses Kerr had been breaking in belonged to Salisbury. The job done, he delivered them to his place and 'tethered the mare in good grass'. In between times he had been showing Reynolds how he wanted the books kept and the store run.



Photo 51: Reid's Hotel as it was in 1936 from Evergreen on <https://www.facebook.com/evergreenvanuatu/posts/404061069661804>. Andrew Read wrote that Madame Janet Reid managed the hotel till 1941 when it was sold to the Rossi family and she moved to Australia.

Now, with things arranged to his liking, he could return to Sydney with an easier mind and he took Reynolds down to Second Channel 'for the run'. *Laperouse* arrived from Indo-China and anchored at Luganville on 4 October. But Kerr was not going straight back to Sydney and when the ship reached Vila he went ashore and booked into Mme. Reid's hotel.

A busy time was ahead of him with some events, like a visit to the Keegan's which included a tennis match, a pleasure. He had

known Thelma Keegan, third daughter of William Lockhart Bell, since her babyhood. Her husband, Philip, was a British Condominium official. There were Customs matters to settle and a visit to the British Government offices to see George Joy about the Annie Petersen estate. Joy wanted him to sit as an Assessor in Court on a case to come on the following week to which he agreed.

There was also a tennis match at Stade [stadium] Rossi followed by dinner at Keegans where M. Jeannin and his wife were also guests. Jeannin was manager of Ballandes' Vila office, *Compagnie Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides*. Other guests were the French doctor, Dr Tessia and his wife. He also played tennis with Seagoes and went with Keegans to the Tennis Club Ball at Rossi's. From this it can be seen that *entente cordiale* did exist between British and French within the Group itself. If there had to be a Condominium then let us get on with it was probably local opinion.

Kerr's quarrel with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* was still going on and he paid a visit to Des Granges about its claim to Makapai. He also enquired about re-registering East Santo Plantations as a French company instead of a British one as it then was, despite the fact that one of the shareholders was French, the My Family.

While in Vila he borrowed a horse from the Keegans and rode out to Pango to look at 'our beach'.¹⁶ He also saw his lawyer, F.E. Wallace, about Annie Petersen's land now released by the British Condominium. Graham Kerr could now, on her behalf, sell to people eager to buy the land the Condominium Government had not paid for, but had till then refused to release.¹⁷

Kerr went down with an attack of 'fever', malaria, during his last hectic days in Vila when he was busy taking orders to be supplied by the Sydney firm. He did not like Vila and was not sad to be leaving on *Morinda* on 17 October. He had expected to meet up with his sister Flora, wife of J.M. Nicol, British District Agent on Tanna and their daughter Ray, when the ship reached Lenakel, but the Nicols' trip to Sydney had been put off until the next trip. They went via Norfolk and Lord Howe where they took on board '50 odd passengers, making about 150 passengers all told, in accommodation for about 25—should not be allowed. Some are camped on deck'.

He was back in Sydney on 26 October 'anchored at Watson's Bay for the Dr about 8am'. When he arrived home he commented that 'Nancy has grown considerably and is looking very well—the others are at school'. He immediately returned to his ceaseless routine as if he had never been away. The Ratards were then in Sydney staying at Petty's Hotel and they visited our home on several occasions and were taken for a picnic to the cottage at Dee Why.¹⁸ M. and Mme. Pascal and M. Ancelin were also in Sydney at this time on their way back to Europe and offered hospitality at home and sight-seeing trips in the car.

There were meetings with his brother and sisters about the future of East Santo Plantations and on 15 November he sent off an option to Leconte in Paris 're the Santo properties'. Dealing in two currencies, sterling and the franc, always had to be taken into consideration and on 23 November, fearing that the franc was 'going back' he and Agnes, the firm's accountant 'cleared up what we have in francs, just leaving a little to keep accounts open'.

The year ended with Graham Kerr flat-hunting for the young Ratards. Nothing was too much trouble for people he considered his friends. As often happened after a trip to the New Hebrides he went down with malaria when he got home. On New Year's Eve he stayed in bed 'as not feeling very bright—got up at midnight and heard tooting in town—exit 1933'. At least it appeared to be a better one than the previous year.

We shall see that much took place in 1933 between Graham Kerr, the Paris headquarters of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and the French Minister for Colonies, some touched on his diary and some not. This, I am sure formed the background to his non-stop activity as if by being always busy he could solve his problems.

On 19 March another French Resident Commissioner would be appointed, Henri Sautot.¹⁹ In the future Graham Kerr would hold him in high regard. Before Philippe de Vomécourt returned to France in February, he and Graham Kerr would have discussed New Hebridean affairs.²⁰ On 21 February Kerr wrote to the French Minister for Colonies. Parts of the letter are here translated back into English from the French translation of the original. The original had been translated into French by a French woman employed by Kerr Bros Sydney office to deal with such matters.²¹

Kerr told the Minister that, representing important interests in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and having been a member of its Board of Administration until 24 November 1932, he considered it his duty to bring the present state of affairs of this company to the attention of the French

Government. He criticised the balance sheets up to 31 December 1931 as being badly represented by the *Conseil*. If the present management is allowed to continue it will end up ruining the company.

To back up my remarks and to give you frank and precise information I refer you to:

- (1) The report of M. Corbin de Mangoux made before the amalgamation of the different companies.
- (2) The report of the Inspector of Colonies, M. Cazaux.
- (3) The report of M. Heilman, Inspector-General of *Credit National*.
- (4) Officials of the French government in New Hebrides amongst them the French Resident Commissioner [M. Casimir] and the Government Agent on Santo.
- (5) M. Gayon, Administrator of Colonies, formerly the representative of the SFNH in Vila. As he has been employed by SFNH, it is my belief that the word of M. Gayon can be believed. His service in the administration of the New Hebrides covers many years and his reputation there is well known. He is really cognisant of the current condition of the company.
- (6) M. de Vomécourt, until recently employed by the SFNH in an important administrative job. He is an intelligent, honourable young man with wide colonial experience. He has resigned, not being able to adopt the methods of the Paris Administration.
- (7) Reports to the SFNH by M. Largeau, Delegate of SFNH's Board to the New Hebrides, his job being to reorganise its working methods. His accurate reports and actions were not to the liking of the members of the Board in Paris. He was recalled from his post and replaced by the local Director-General, New Hebrides [Vibert]. Unfortunately M. Largeau was ill ... and he died several weeks after his return to Paris. M. Largeau was a very honest man and earlier spent many years in the Hebrides and performed successfully there. His reports can be seen at the HQ of SFNH in Paris and are available to you.
- (8) M. Ancelin who has held the position of Director-General of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* for four years. He is an old settler in New Hebrides and has been successful and is an honest man, well-known in the Group. He is completely up-to-date on the present situation of the SFNH.

Kerr then gave his own credentials and his 40 years active association with the Group. He mentioned his uncle Captain Donald Macleod first local Director of *Compagnie Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (forerunner of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*). An important part of the land belonging to the present company belonged to him at one time. He said his uncle was a Francophile but did not mention the various disagreements Macleod had had with the French.²²

He continued that he was a member of the *Conseil* of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* when the company—based on the sale of Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations—was set up in 1927:

Some time after the amalgamation of the different companies, I was given a seat on the Board of Administration of SFNH in Paris. This suited these people very well as long as I was in Australia and not able to intervene in their plans. After giving one of the members [Raoul-Duval] authority to represent me at Board meetings, I regret to have to say that this authority was badly misplaced. During my visit to Paris in 1932 I was very surprised to discover the real state of affairs and I was far from well-received by the Board following my criticism of its methods. Following the General Meeting, the man in charge [Charles Aupied] stopped at nothing to discredit me and prevent my re-election to the Board. He rediscovered suddenly that there had been a discussion of the number of trees on the property [Turtle Bay] when it was sold in 1927 by Kerr Bros. to the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* although this property was transferred to him. He was also one of the members of the board who nominated me as an Administrator of SFNH.

Kerr could not understand why the French Government, which has much to do with the control of the company and the shareholders, permits the present administration to continue its operations. Even if the government came to the aid of *Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides* with a loan, things cannot continue for much longer.

It is regrettable to see the way these fine properties are managed. Sensible methods are not used to safeguard the national interest or those of the shareholders.

He then brought up the debt of about 8 million francs owed to the Bank of Indo-China, mentioned on the last balance sheet. The losses on the balance sheet were covered, he wrote by over-valuation of assets. He illustrated his point by referring to a boat, *Jeanne d'Arc*, which appeared on the balance sheet at the same value as in 1927, about 200,000F. Graham Kerr included with his letter 'a recent photo of the boat which will let you see that it has no actual present or future value and has been in this state for a long time. In 1927 it was a very good boat'.²³ This was 1933, and it was a total wreck. This was as good an example as any of the totally misleading findings presented by the Board to the shareholders.

As regards the five year contract of the present Director General in charge of local operations [which was Leon Vibert, although not mentioned by name] I accuse the members of the Board of lack of concern for the shareholders' interests. Many times I have brought to the attention of the Board that the person they have placed in charge is not suitable for the position [and here he drew attention to the reports of Corbin de Mangoux, Cazaux, Heilman and the other people named above]. He has been granted a salary out of all proportion given the present bad times [the Depression] and besides a bonus of 70F a ton on copra, above 475 tons, and 70F on cacao above 5 tons, whether these products be sold at gain or loss. He is also to receive 100F a hectare on all land recently planted.²⁴

Kerr then went into the huge sums spent annually in Paris on non-essential and non-productive services and instanced from the budget sheet for the year ending 30 June 1932, a sum of 81,690F drawn by M. Aupied although he has not the responsibilities of a delegated administrator. He said that costs of litigation, both in Paris and Vila, were very high and the balance sheet heading 'gratuities and other expenses' included unspecified items.

All this came from the close perusal of the Balance sheets that he had finally been able to read at *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* headquarters the previous October and shows why they did not welcome his inspection. But while he was a Board Member because of his large share-holding, they could not prevent him from seeing them. Hence Aupied's action to get him removed.

He ended his letter to the Minister by telling him that the Board should be set up either in the New Hebrides or New Caledonia with a representative of the Government under the direction of the Governor of New Caledonia, who was also French High Commissioner for the New Hebrides, to advise him. It was not possible to administer New Hebrides business from Paris. It would be sufficient to have an office in Paris which would be the place for the Assembly of Shareholders to receive the verified balance sheet and reports of the New Hebrides Administration.

He told the Minister that he had asked his fellow share-holders to call an Extraordinary General Meeting to discuss matters. He was convinced that the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* with normal production could continue to advance and make progress. He here mentioned the business he had pursued with such keenness the previous year regarding French coconut production in the New Hebrides and New Caledonia for manufacture into edible fat for the French market. This was at present in the hands of Unilever which sold copra everywhere and set its own prices.²⁵ It would be essential to get protection from the French government. With a little encouragement factories could be set up in New Caledonia to transform the original material.

His letter ended with the plea that

You give the matters I have raised just and impartial consideration and I repeat I have only revealed these facts in order to protect the interests of the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and general French interests in the New Hebrides.

On the face of it this sounds very strange coming from a British subject. But it has to be realised that this British subject was a large shareholder in a French company based in the New Hebrides which was a Condominium of both British and French interests, in which the French Government stood by its planters while the British government refused to allow its nationals to get outside labour to run their plantations. So much so, that many of them had sold out to French interests. This, two British Resident Commissioners Merton King and Smith-Rewse who were both deeply concerned, had repeatedly warned the Colonial Office would happen. And now it had.

Relations between both British and French planters in the Group were generally good. Vibert, Aupied's proxy, and direct from France with no real knowledge of how the Condominium worked or any intention of finding out, was the disruptive element. To him New Hebrides was as good as a French colony and took its orders from France, not the Condominium Government. As for Graham Kerr, honesty in business transactions was of prime importance, not the country of the transactor either British or French.

Kerr wrote to André Joyer in Paris on 7 March 1933 including a copy of his Statement to the Minister and telling him that he was forwarding copies to all the main shareholders of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. Thirty-six names were on the list that Joyer had sent him and Kerr omitted Charles Aupied, Raoul-Duval, and Edouard Picanon, for obvious reasons. He was hoping that Joyer would

... cooperate and push the matter home. You cannot fail to recognise that, with present methods of administration, it is only a matter of a short time when the *Société* will have to suspend operations. If the shareholders will only step in and compel a change, there is still a chance to save the *Société* from ruin ... A combined effort is required ...

If the French Government could be induced to protect edible fats produced from French-grown coconuts, SFNH could very soon turn the corner ... The great Unilever combine is exploiting the French market. Why not a French Company with the necessary protection for French production? ... Copra is down to 11 pounds seven shillings and sixpence in the European market, yet you will find Coconut margarine retailed @ 10000 francs per ton... A French company to convert the coconut to edible fats is the remedy.

He told Joyer that he had hoped to get the statement to him earlier 'but with translation and so many copies to be made, it has taken considerable time'.

At the same time he forwarded a copy to Philippe de Vomécourt now back in Paris, telling him he had given the Minister his address, hoping

... that the Ministry of Colonies may seek further information from you. Will you see M. Joyer and discuss matters with him. I am writing to M. Jules Leconte telling him you will probably call on him.

Graham Kerr had no idea of the scale of corruption in French Government circles. One of the shareholders he wrote to in good faith was M. Tronchon, a Government Representative on the Board of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. He was cultivated by Charles Aupied because of his close connections in the Ministries for Colonies and Finance and the connection cemented by illegal handouts of large sums of money.²⁶ He was not going to see things Kerr's way. Nor was M. Germain, another shareholder. He was chief accountant for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and under Aupied's thumb by reason of his son being married to the Aupied's daughter.²⁷ *Banque Bénard Frères*, one of whose Directors was the son of Tronchon's mistress, would also not have welcomed Kerr's appeal.

Financial scandals, some of which I have mentioned in earlier chapters were part of the Paris scene in the 1920s and 1930s. Even Joyer, no longer on the Board of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, and kept in the dark like most shareholders, as to the exact doings of Aupied and his coterie, found it

difficult to believe that Tronchon, a friend of many years, was implicated until he was begged by Tronchon to prevent things leaking out so he would not lose his job.²⁸ This Joyer refused to do, but he would have realised the necessity to tread warily where Aupied was concerned. But Graham Kerr would have no such qualms as he had never before met with such blatant corruption. He would in the near future refer to Aupied as another 'Stavisky', a man much in the news at this time.²⁹

Joyer, after receiving his copy of the statement made by Graham Kerr to the Minister for Colonies on 26 April 1933, wrote back that many of the shareholders wanted more detailed information about the balance sheets for 1930-31. Despite the fact that Aupied had said that shareholders agreed unanimously with him at the time Graham Kerr was thrown off the Board so ending further discussion, 'they had not failed to notice that the accounts as presented, hid losses under the artificial over-evaluation of assets'. Joyer said shareholders had found in my father's 'interesting communication proof, if such were necessary, of an exaggeration in cost of exploitation and general expenses' but they had not found enough definite facts to be able to act.

Joyer thought they had been surprised to receive the erroneous balance sheet at the meeting of 24 November 1932 but that he himself had not thought he was authorised to reveal to them that these accounts had been made up, without regular consultation between Board members. Instead the accounts had proceeded from an official agreement which was altogether illegal between a Director (Aupied) and an Auditor (was this Germain or Tronchon?)

The shareholders wished Kerr had been more explicit when he wrote that the balance sheets had been 'badly presented' and if he could produce further facts they could be read out at the next general meeting. Joyer said that Kerr's 'personality'—meaning his credibility—would then certainly be discussed and his shares (sic) should be regularly deposited so that he could be represented there by a fully documented and qualified attorney. If only Edward Jacomb had been available. The Board could call a meeting with barely 16 days notice and without somebody able to represent him at short notice Kerr would be at the Board's mercy.

He had discussed Kerr's ideas about French Customs protection for margarine made from coconut fat with the Director of Public affairs at the Ministry for Colonies. There were many articles in colonial newspapers on the subject, which supported his ideas. Objection came from Marseilles but he thought that

... this resistance will be broken and that a protection, even if not complete, at least sufficient, will be assured to the colonial production.

In his reply to Joyer on 7 June Kerr told him that at the meeting of November 24 1932

... the Balance sheets were never presented, or details discussed at any meeting of *Conseil*. Personally, I knew nothing of the contents until they were presented at the General Assembly. Meetings of *Conseil* were only a farce. We had no Deputy Administrator; all administrative matters being apparently arranged by a committee of two, Aupied/Raoul-Duval.

He then asked if Joyer would be prepared to represent him at the 1933 General meeting and, if so, to sent the necessary form of authority.

If on the other hand, you prefer to remain out of my dispute with *Conseil* ... I shall arrange for someone else to represent me.

He told him he had already had replies back from shareholders Senator Paul Lederlin and Monsieur Henri Lepeyre and he would be glad if Joyer could see them if he thought anything useful might come of it.³⁰ He had been trying to rally the French planters of New Hebrides and New Caledonia to press their Government for protection of coconut products.

They are receiving less than 50 centimes per kilo for what the consumer is paying 10 francs for the converted article.

On 18 April Paul Lederlin, Senator representing Corsica, acknowledged receipt of Kerr's letter of 21 February and expressed himself entirely in agreement with the calling of an Extra-ordinary General Meeting of the shareholders of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* at a time Graham Kerr thought fit.

Henry Lepeytre, *Chargé de Mission au Cabinet, Du Garde des Sceaux, Ministère de la Justice*, replied on 27 April. He thought the questions raised should be studied seriously as he and several of his friends had important interests in the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. He asked: 'Are you thinking of coming to Paris or do you have a person qualified to represent you?'

Graham Kerr sent the same reply to both these men on 7 June. He told them that when he was in Paris in 1932 he

... found himself absolutely unable to move the *Conseil* to better methods. The other members of the *Conseil* would not listen to my suggestions, nor would they permit my intimate knowledge of New Hebrides affairs guide them in any way. Unfortunately my lack of speaking-French enabled them, the more readily, to ignore what I put forward. I apologise to no one for my proposals for a better control of affairs ... We must make drastic changes ... [Responsible administration has to be at the scene of action.] The backbone of the whole affair is, of course, exploitation [in other words, production.] High and ineffective administrative costs in Paris would have to go.

When important shareholders are willing to make a move to put affairs on a better footing, I shall do all I can to help towards that end; alone I cannot do much. I am unable to go to Paris now, as I have my own affairs here, to attend to.³¹

He concluded by mentioning his attempt to rally French planters in New Hebrides and New Caledonia to ask their Government for coconut protection.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if he had had a qualified French lawyer in Paris to fight for him at this stage? Joyer, for one, thought it necessary but he did not know the New Hebrides situation. Edward Jacomb qualified in both British and French law and the author of a book on the Condominium Government of New Hebrides had told Kerr that his case was completely a matter for the Joint Court in Vila.

By Condominium law, any British versus French dispute about fixed property in the New Hebrides, and the trees on Turtle Bay plantation—the basis of the case Aupied later brought against Kerr Bros—were 'fixed' there. In that case a law suit brought in Paris would be illegal. Kerr knew this and hence did not act. But, not to be deprived of their prey, Aupied and his friends in the French government, unknown to Kerr, were already working on ways to get round this 'obstacle' in their efforts to discredit his revelations.

Kerr was not without friends. De Vomécourt, back in Paris in April, told him that if he could be of use in a private or business capacity he would only be too pleased. He passed on confidentially that M. Déchery, now employed by Vibert in the Group, was not at all happy in his new job and very critical of Vibert. For himself De Vomécourt told Kerr that if he heard of a good job going in Australia he would be grateful for a recommendation.

On 1 May, following Kerr's February 21 appeal to the Minister for Colonies, Aupied rose to the attack.³² And attack it was! Here in rough translation is part of it:

We thought we should present you with a refutation of [Kerr's] letter while stressing the motives which have dictated it and which explain without justifying it, and still less, without excusing its bad faith.

Couched in seemingly magnanimous terms Aupied wrote that

Mr Kerr, a businessman from Sydney, of Australian origin, came to France to solicit the SFNH to allow him to play an important part in an industrial affair, [the coconut fat

business] which he intended to set up and to send him to the Colony with full powers, either as Director-General or as one in charge of Mission.

But the Board of our *Société* after carefully examining his papers and his antecedents, has rejected his proposition, as too self-interested, without serious foundation, and decided to bring two legal actions against him, one for restitution of a sum of 3 million francs, representing the value of 30,000 trees guaranteed as in existence on property sold to the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* [in 1927] and found to be lacking; the other for obtaining either his eviction from a property which he occupies unlawfully, or the payment of a just compensation.

The above would be laughable except for the fact it was meant to be taken seriously. ‘Straight-forward’ was the word, attached to Graham Kerr in the New Hebrides by everyone who had business dealings with him: his name a guarantee of probity. One could say that he was self-interested but only in the sense that he had over a million francs invested, first in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 1927 and then transferred to shares in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* when it absorbed *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in July 1930. But surely all shareholders should be interested in the management of the company in which they have invested so much money.

But the motives Aupied attached to Kerr were of the opportunistic variety more properly applicable to himself. Nothing was concealed in Kerr’s presentation of the situation to the Minister. Nor did he do anything but state his qualifications for criticising the present management and offer to help. Aupied thought that this impression must be removed and that Kerr should be shown to be an untrustworthy customer who would sink to any trick for financial gain. Once again the tree-count was brought up—a different number of trees this time. The property ‘unlawfully’ occupied could only be Hog Harbour plantation, legally transferred to Kerr Bros. through their solicitor, F.E. Wallace, in the Joint Court Vila by the Thomas Brothers in 1928 for 17,500 pounds. The Kerrs had been given first option to buy and, angered by underhand attempts by Aupied’s men to undercut deals already agreed on, took it up themselves.

At this time, realising that the take-over of Hog Harbour had been a bad mistake, Kerr Bros had given an option to buy to Jules Leconte for 17,000, pounds. Leconte was no friend of the present *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* management.

Graham Kerr, continued Aupied, was an ‘old offender’:

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise had to pay an indemnity of 500,000 francs to *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* for 7000 hectares which Kerr sold to them and which did not belong to him.

In explanation, before entering into negotiations with Aupied in January 1927 Kerr had stressed that future buyers of the properties on offer would have to go through the land-claims part of the Condominium Joint Court to be granted title to land that might be disputed by other parties—in this case *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*—and that was their responsibility.

Neither *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* nor its linked companies—*Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, based on Higginson’s holdings in the New Hebrides, and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* soon to be merged with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*—were ever comfortable with what it considered ‘intrusion’ into their rights by the Joint Court. Thus Aupied, Paris Director of all three companies was paying 500,000F to himself.

Regarding Kerr’s accusation of overvaluation of assets to cover losses:

This statement is contrary to the facts [and he brought up the boat *Jeanne d’Arc*]. The boat in question, which came from *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides-Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, was after examination, considered by SFNH to be worthless, and from November 1932 demolition commenced; its materials have been used for other constructions. The photo taken by Mr Kerr is after the first demolitions were carried out.

As we already know from a letter Robertson wrote to Graham Kerr in 1928, *Jeanne d'Arc* was the new name given to *Lunawanna*, sold to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* by Kerr Bros in 1927, driven on shore in a hurricane and allowed by Vibert to stay there. Neither Kerr, who bought *Lunawanna* himself in Hobart in 1921, nor Robbie, who had it under his care while managing Turtle Bay Plantation before it was sold, would have mistaken it for any boat coming from *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides-Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*. A valuable boat, it had been allowed to go to rack and ruin from 1928 until November 1932 before its timbers were used for 'other constructions'.³³

Aupied then wrote about expenses incurred in Paris which Kerr had said were too high. Regarding staff he said: 'SFNH comprises one Director in Chief, one Secretary-General, one book keeper, three shorthand typist-secretaries, and looks after the work of four companies.' The Director was Aupied. The Secretary-General did his bidding, as did the accountant Germain, father-in-law of Aupied's daughter; while the woman in charge of the secretaries was Aupied's mistress, Mme. Mura. Aupied did not mention here that when the plantation companies *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* were merged into SFNH, he had secretly paid himself 60,000F for his 'efforts'.

Aupied ended his letter to the Minister commenting on the people Kerr had listed as being trustworthy and competent to be questioned on the doings of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in the New Hebrides:

Mr Gayon, Administrator of Colonies, Director of the Real Estate Division. He had his appointment terminated.

Ancelin, Manager of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*. He was dismissed.



Photo 52: Vale *Lunawanna*; photo is undated (but before 1921) and taken off Sullivan's Cove, Hobart; O'May Collection, Maritime Museum of Tasmania (P_OM.D.85a). Undated and permission was granted to use the photo.

M. de Vomécourt, Plantation Manager. He was sent home.

M. Largeau saw his work reduced, then abolished.

On the other hand it is M. Vibert, present Director General in New Hebrides, who in his position as Director of Plantations of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* who discovered and pointed out the 'errors' and bad faith of Mr Kerr whose present attitude can only be explained by the simple exposé and the facts which we have given you.³⁴

Not only was Kerr presented as a devious crook but four highly-regarded witnesses he had named were summarily

dismissed by a man supported by the Ministries of Finance and for Colonies who had never been to the New Hebrides and was only interested in the place for the real-estate deals he might be able to swing.

Aupied and his man on the spot, Vibert, were working out the best way to 'get' Graham Kerr. In a letter to Aupied dated 6 May, Vibert, who had been asked by Aupied to find out the legal position of a contract—signed and registered in the New Hebrides—involving France, consulted Coursin, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides's* legal adviser at that time.³⁵

Coursin told him 'that the law could not be evoked on the price of the landed property' but he 'estimated that it could be exacted on the price of the handover of the moveable property based on the trade

of the seller: the resulting amount reckoned in this way could be raised on the base of 7% to the sum of 231,766 francs 05 centimes'. Vibert asked Aupied to examine this new question with your department.

In other words, the granting of title and final Registration in the Joint Court in Vila to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* of the landed properties set out in Graham Kerr's offer on 7 February 1927 and agreed to and signed by Audoin, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*'s official representative in the British Residency Vila on 11 October 1928, could not be overturned, so they would have to try and get him on the moveable items sold.

This is why they kept trying to get D.H. Kerr and Graham Kerr to sign a contract combining the contradictory tree count with the other goods sold. This met with refusal, as it would cancel out the vital clause in the original deal that the buyers had to inspect the irremovables they were buying before they signed it. This, for reasons of their own, the buyers did not do.

Graham Kerr's straightforward appeal to the French Minister for Colonies was not only on Kerr Brothers' behalf but to try and save a French company with very valuable assets in the New Hebrides that was being completely financially ruined by incompetence, though financial chicanery might be the better word.

On 26 July Joyer told him from Paris that the General Assembly of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* for 1933 would be held in October or November. Important accounting documents for 1932 had just arrived in Paris. These would, with justifying letters, be sent by Aupied on 8 July to Monsieur A. Brunet, *Deputé, Ancien Sous-Secrétaire d'Etat* and to Monsieur Gaston Joseph, *Directeur de Affaires Politiques, Ministère des Colonies*.³⁶

Joyer summed up the accounting documents for Graham Kerr showing that the balance to 31 December 1932 would be 6 million, 200 thousand francs for working expenses, and 1 million 600 thousand francs for sale of produce. 'It is quite certain that such results will not be shown to the shareholders as the above mentioned letters to the Ministries assured'.

After Kerr's letter to the Minister for Colonies was received, Aupied had been asked to explain. As a result of Aupied's letters of 8 July, Joyer wrote that

... the Ministry is thus completely misled. Will it shut its eyes to such a trick, and grant the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* new financial aid?

Joyer said he would gladly represent Kerr at the next General Assembly but he thought it would perhaps be better if someone else took over the job and that person and Joyer worked in accord. He sent the forms Kerr would have to sign which had to be endorsed by the French Consul in Sydney and which had to arrive in Paris early in October for an annual meeting in November.

Joyer stressed the importance of documents Kerr had previously showed him

... the two letters of October 1932, which were written to you by SFNH and M. Raoul-Duval, concerning the non-presentation at the meeting of the SFNH [24 November 1932] of the accounts and reports for 1931.³⁷

On 9 October Kerr sent Joyer a letter introducing Michel Pascal who had just left for France 'or rather reintroducing him as I believe you engaged him.' This was back in 1928 when Joyer was joint director with Aupied of the newly formed *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. Pascal

... has just concluded a 5 year engagement at Turtle Bay and Surunda ... I have asked him to make a rendezvous with you. I am sure he can give you much useful first hand information. He has a very good reputation—in fact I have heard nothing but good of him from Monsieur Largeau and others. It is necessary for Paris to grasp the actual situation in the New Hebrides.

He did not receive Joyer's letter of 26 July until 31 October when he returned from his trip to the New Hebrides described earlier in the chapter. It was now too late for him to send the required Power

of Attorney allowing Joyer to represent him at the November General Assembly, but he would send one by airmail endorsed by the French Consul as required just in case:

I am not sufficiently acquainted with other shareholders, except those I have not the necessary confidence in, to ask any of them to represent me. I know you will do all in your power for the clean administration of the SFNH and I have confidence in your representation. Count on me to back you... I am much afraid that we are too late. What has been going on is tragic.

Kerr told Joyer that Jules Leconte held the keys to the Safety Deposit which held his shares and that he was writing to him to place them at Joyer's disposal and return them to Joyer after the Assembly. He also 'enclosed copies of the letters to SFNH and Raoul-Duval together with the original replies from them re the convocation of the General Assembly of 1932 and the presenting of the Balance sheet to that Assembly'.

Kerr was aware that Aupied was out to get him and that the Hog Harbour property should never have been bought in the first place—not that there was any illegality about the purchase. He obtained the agreement of his fellow shareholders in East Santo Plantations—his brother and sisters and the My family—on 15 November to give Jules Leconte of 7 Rue Franklin Paris a 3 month option ending 28 February 1934 to buy East Santo Plantations for 25,000 pounds, Australian currency.³⁸ Graham Kerr knew him well and had looked after his son Edouard at our home in Sydney in 1922. He had said that Leconte 'is a good ally'.

On 1 December he received a letter from Joyer giving him news of an agreement reached over several months between the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and the Ministers for Colonies and Finance following from the letter and disastrous Balance sheet for 1933-4 which Aupied had sent them on 8 July. Joyer had just received the text of the agreement and put Kerr briefly in the picture. The essential part was that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would cede to the Ministry for Colonies 185 hectares of the 450,000 hectares it claimed in the New Hebrides plus its seaboard territories and mining rights. In return *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would receive 8,300,000 francs of which 4,800,000 had to be repaid to the Bank of Indo-China and 1,000,000 was for money owed to the French part of the Condominium Government in New Hebrides. This would leave the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* with about 2,500,000 francs. A further condition was that within a year its plantation companies would have to be sold. *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was to function as a real-estate company only with no plantation interests.

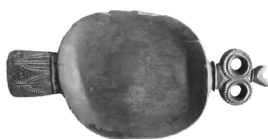
Such significant changes, wrote Joyer, should be subjected to the agreement of the shareholders at an extraordinary general meeting. The accounts had not yet been checked and Joyer thought it could not possibly take place before the last fortnight of January or the first one of February 1934. Graham Kerr would thus need to deposit his shares and choose a person to represent his interests at this meeting.

Endnotes

- 1 My only brother, then aged 10, and youngest sister aged 4, were not affected by this lack of fatherly attention at this time. In fact Nancy, the baby, got all that he had to spare. After discussion with friends of my age I do not think he was much different from most fathers of that era when girl children were not supposed to have opinions of their own. My eldest sister Joyce, almost 20, was about to attend the Kindergarten Training College at Waverley; Muriel was given a scholarship to allow her to remain at Wenona, North Sydney; I was happy at North Sydney Girls' High School and Margaret, up till this time a pupil at Wenona, was sent to a Domestic Science School in Mosman without being consulted. She felt affronted. It was not the right school for a girl of her abilities. My brother attended North Sydney Boys' Grammar School, commonly called Shore.
- 2 For a short biography of Louis Ancelin see *Hébridais* p. 2-3. He arrived in the New Hebrides in 1898 and settled on Epi on land granted by SFNH. After the death of his first wife he left the Group and by the early 1920s was settled in France. In the New Hebrides he had been associated with Fernand Largeau and Jules Leconte another early French planter who also returned to France and whose daughter, Matilde Leconte, Ancelin took as his second wife. After the business he set up in France with E. Caillard, another returnee, failed Ancelin became a Director of CAMNH, one of the plantation companies taken over by SFNH in 1930. He, like my father, knew exactly what was going on under the Aupied/Vibert regime.
- 3 On 21 April, my father questioned 'that waster Evans about the many discrepancies at Hog Harbour'. Lack of honesty in money matters was unforgivable to his way of thinking.
- 4 See WPHC No 98/1912, Wreck of SS Tathra. Merton King, the British Resident Commissioner held an inquiry in Vila. *Néo Hébridais* 4 March 1912 also reported the loss of Tathra. This matter was dealt with extensively in Kerr Brothers Book 1 Chapter 14 Part 1 1912 'The wreck of the Tathra', pp. 186-202.
- 5 For F.J. Fleming, manager of Metevan Plantation Ltd, Bushman's Bay Mallekula, see short biography *Hébridais* p. 68.
- 6 Houchard esteemed by everybody was a trusted friend and client of Kerr Bros. Ltd. For a short biography see *Hébridais* pp. 104-106, and *Calédoniens* 1953, p. 123.
- 7 Francois was a long-time employee of Kerr Brothers whom my father never faulted. He was trustworthy and reliable. According to H.E.L. Priday Island Trader pt. 2, p. 296 'one of the half-castes who worked for Kerr Brothers was Jean Marie Francois, skipper of the Toa, who took his name from three different Frenchmen, he did not know which one was his father'.
- 8 This was Michel Pascal, installed at a lower rate of pay by Vibert in July 1932 to manage Turtle Bay Plantation when de Vomécourt left.
- 9 The three men named had plantations on Aore, an island lying just south of Segond Channel, the land being originally granted to them by SFNH.
- 10 Georges Dedieu (1893-1937) arrived in New Hebrides in 1904 with his family. They were related to the Delcung Saint-Martin and Ratard families. They settled at Segond Channel on a 50 hectare grant from SFNH. In 1926 Dedieu too received a concession of land on Aore from SFNH. For short biography see *Hébridais* pp. 52-53.
- 11 In 1906 Paulin Ratard married Jeanne the sister of Raymond Delcung-Saint-Martin a French settler from New Caledonia who took up a concession of land at Segond Channel from the SFNH in 1904. In 1912 Raymond decided to return to Noumea with his wife and baby travelling on the Tathra. They did not reach their destination. The three were among those drowned number which also included my eldest sister Jean, aged 16 months when Tathra foundered in a raging hurricane on 4 Jan 1912. Raymond, with the baby and his panic-stricken wife, were in the water as was my father trying to reach the nearby shore at the Maskelynes. See *Hébridais* p. 53 for an account of this tragedy. The Captain of Tathra was not Hoenden as given here, but Halliday. This matter was dealt with extensively in Kerr Brothers Book 1 Chapter 14 Part 1 1912 'The wreck of the Tathra', pp. 186-202.
- 12 Paulin Ratard was a practical as well as innovative man after my own fathers' heart as can be seen from his biography in *Hébridais* pp. 193-194. He had two sons Aubert and Jean who followed in his footsteps.
- 13 Alphonse Audouin 1880-1940 was the missionary in charge of the Marist Mission station at Port Olry. He used to Visit the Store at Hog Harbour plantation in his launch for supplies. The Marist Mission did not throw its weight round in the Group like the New Hebrides Mission. The SS Oronsay sank in 1942 during World War 2.
- 14 Auguste Harbulot 1902-1941, born in Noumea, came to the New Hebrides in 1922. He worked for Julius Petersen on Mate Wulu Plantation before setting up for himself at Port Olry, growing coconuts, coffee, and cacao on 300 hectares.
- 15 This was Cecilia, Dupertuis' only daughter, apparently used to airing her opinions, unlike my father's daughters who diplomatically (or cravenly) kept theirs to themselves. Cecilia would, in 1940, become the second wife of Jean Ratard, elder son of Paulin Ratard. Strangely I learned from Paulin Ratard's biography in *Hébridais* that he and his younger son's wife, Suzanne, a trained scientist, did not see eye to eye. So much so that they left the plantation and lived in Noumea for some years. I wonder what Paulin thought of Cecilia? Perhaps, in 1940 at the age of 20 she

- was more guarded in expressing her opinions than had been the case in 1933?
- 16 This beach, still called Kerr's Beach, Reece Discombe told me some time ago, was where my father bought a piece of land in the second decade of last century to get away from the summer heat of Vila. Here I had my first sea-side holiday aged 3 months in December 1917. It would be sold in 1937 to Des Granges getting him in the bad books of SFNH whose lawyer he then was, as being in cahoots with the Kerrs, their enemies.
 - 17 One of these was Des Granges who on 20 Dec asked my father if he would sell him land near the border with Barrau's as he wanted to build himself an office. See Yellow Folder No. 9, History of the Vysuck estate. Letters dated 23 Jan, 24 Oct and 20 Dec deal with this subject.
 - 18 This was Jean, Paulin Ratard's elder son, who had just married Gilberte, daughter of Edouard-Philippe Gané. Their honeymoon was probably being spent in Sydney. It was a very short marriage. A daughter, Genevieve was born in 1934, and Gilberte died in Noumea in July 1936. I remember meeting her at our home in 1933 when I was in my teens and thinking how fragile she looked.
 - 19 For short Biography of Henri Sautot 1885–1963 see Patrick O'Reilly. *Calédoniens* pp. 233–234 in Blue Folder No. 3.
 - 20 For letters Philippe de Vomécourt to G.L.S. Kerr, 29 July 1932, 6 Feb, 4 April, and 24 May 1933 see Clarence Letter File.
 - 21 For copy of his letter in French and in rough translation see Folder 10, Xeroxes obtained by me from the Outre Mer Archives in Paris in 1983. Another copy is in White Envelope No. 6. Pierre Laval was the man to whom my father addressed his statement.
 - 22 Perhaps he did not know about them. Many of Macleod's papers were destroyed in the 1920s by a young NZ relation who did not realise their value. Part of my job when writing Macleod's story, *Making of a Rebel*, many years after my father died, was to ferret out the material from extant records.
 - 23 Jeanne d'Arc was the new name given to Lunawanna, a ketch built in Tasmania and very highly regarded, which carried a gilded rooster at the top of her main-mast, won for being 'Cock of the Derwent' and purchased by Graham Kerr in Hobart in 1921. Robbie in a letter to him from Hog Harbour dated 19 March 1928 re Turtle Bay plantation, now under the direction of 'our Dear Friend' (Vibert), wrote 'The Lunawanna or Saint Something they have named her now, went ashore in the blow and is pretty badly damaged'. It seems that Vibert did not bother to get her fixed.
 - 24 Read in conjunction with Vibert's report of August 1932, which I dealt with in Chapter 14, this is quite illuminating.
 - 25 On 15 March my father sent Joyer an article from the Noumea Bulletin du Commerce, 15 Feb 1933 titled: 'La défense de la production coloniale', which showed how badly hit were French producers of coconuts in New Hebrides and New Caledonia, including SFNH, by the present disastrous price of copra. He wanted Joyer to bring it to the notice of the Minister for Colonies. In another letter to Joyer, 7 June he told him that French planters were at present receiving less than 50 centimes per kilo for what the consumer is paying 10 francs for the article converted into margarine. For letters G.L.S. Kerr/Joyer 1933 see Orange Clipped Folder No. 1. Joyer Letter File.
 - 26 See Folder No.10. Xeroxes from the Outre Mer Archives, Kerr to Tronchon 21 March 1933.
 - 27 The complicated stockbroking swindles carried out over the years by Aupied and his accomplices, Tronchon, Germain, and others, but kept from most of the shareholders, were set out in a confidential report sent by Joyer to my father's Marseilles Agents Th. and Ed. Jullien in 1935, and forwarded on. See Orange Clipped Folder No. 2. Corres. G.L.S. Kerr and Th. and Ed. Jullien, 1932–1940. By 1935 SFNH had gone bankrupt and the French Public Prosecutor was trying to hold an enquiry, which the French Government, which was implicated, was in no way prepared to hurry along. Aupied was now actively seeking a scapegoat. Who better than my father?
 - 28 The information on Tronchon comes from a report on SFNH sent confidentially to my father by Joyer in March 1935. See White Envelope No.3. Separate envelope: documentation of corrupt practices of Charles Aupied.
 - 29 Serge Alexandre Stavisky 1886–1934 was a Russian Jew who settled in his youth in France. He was known for shady financial deals over many years but never brought to justice because of connections with the police and high up members of parliament. Before 1933 ended, his doings blew up into a scandal which brought down the Government of Camille Chautemps, said to be implicated. Stavisky himself would die in mysterious circumstances in Jan 1934, supposedly by suicide but he was generally believed to been murdered by the police to prevent him naming too many people in high government positions. Pierre Laval was French Minister for Colonies (sic) at this time and the man to whom my father addressed his statement. Laval, disliked and distrusted by his French fellows, managed to clear his name in the Stavisky affair but his reputation was not good and he was thought to be implicated in the coming persecution of my father. For a good picture of the chaotic situation in France and the Stavisky affair see. Marnham, Patrick, *The Death of Jean Moulin; Biography of a Ghost*, Penguin, Lond. Pimlico, 2001, pp. 62–70.
 - 30 See Clarence File, SFNH Matters for copies of these letters.
 - 31 See Clarence Letter File. SFNH Matters. Letter Kerr to H. Lepeytre and P. Lederlin, 7 June 1933.

- 32 See Folder No.10. Xeroxes from Outre Mer Archives. Letter Aupied to Minister for Colonies 1 May 1933.
- 33 As noted in an earlier footnote Jeanne d'Arc was the new name given to Lunawanna. Robbie in a letter to him from Hog Harbour dated 19 March 1928 regarding Turtle Bay plantation, now under the direction of 'our Dear Friend' (Vibert), wrote 'The Lunawanna or Saint Something they have named her now, went ashore in the blow and is pretty badly damaged'. It seems that Vibert did not bother to get her fixed.
- 34 This letter was found in the Outre Mer Archives in Paris in 1983. 71 APC. SFNH. Serie II. Administrateurs—Kerr.
- 35 See Folder No. 10 Xeroxes from Outre Mer Archives. Aupied to Directeur Général de l'Enregistrement des Domaines et du Timbre. Ministère des Finances Paris 6 May 1933.
- 36 See Orange Clipped Folder No.1, Joyer Letter File. Copies of the letters to Brunet and Gaston-Joseph dated 8 July 1933 are included here.
- 37 See Chapter 14 (1932). Letter re meeting of Kerr with Aupied and Raoul-Duval 4 Nov, followed by a letter to the latter dated 5 Nov. Other letters dealt with at this time are also relevant.
- 38 See White Envelope No. 12.



Chapter 16 1934: The Depression is Now Biting Hard

At the beginning of 1934 East Santo Plantations Limited was a British concern with one French shareholder, the My family. With a worsening market for copra and no help coming from Australia, the French subsidy paid to French subjects caused the shareholders to put their heads together to see if they could work things out and on 2 January 1934 Jean My signed a declaration appointing G.L.S. Kerr and D.H. Kerr to manage a property:

... which I have leased from ESP Ltd, such appointment being till 30 June 1934 and shall automatically extend from year to year unless either side gives one month's notice of termination.¹

In connection with this Graham Kerr on 24 January wrote to the Mys: 'The copra market is deplorable, being as low as 7 pounds 12 shillings and sixpence sterling in London and Marseilles. What are growers going to do with a price like that? We are negotiating for sale of the property in France, but do not know what will come from negotiations'. It was in the hands of his good friend Jules Leconte in Paris.² British plantation owners were leaving the New Hebrides and it was unlikely there would be a British buyer under present conditions.

The lease began on 1 July 1933 and covered five shipments of copra and a little castor seed sent to East Santo Plantations agents, Th. and Ed. Jullien in Marseilles. If it was not too late, Graham Kerr hoped that these shipments could be considered for the French '*de-taxe*', Jean My being a French subject:

Will it be necessary for you to notify the French Authorities that you have had the place under lease as from 1 July 1933? We cannot transfer native labour to you, but there is nothing to prevent them working for you as free labour. East Santo Plantations has sufficient labour indentured to them, till July next ... [He hoped he] was not putting too much trouble on your shoulders. Once the place gets running under the My Flag it need not be troubling you too much, apart for the Certificates of Origin. [Necessary when produce was shipped from the plantation.]

On 16 January, dealing with yet another problem, Graham Kerr wrote to his Vila lawyer F.E. Wallace, at present in Hobart on sick leave, asking if the piece of land at Pango he had sold to Des Granges was finalised yet. He also wanted to know how Joy was going in his negotiations with the British Government about Annie Petersen's land. She still owned valuable beach front land and he hoped that Wallace had given notice to those at present occupying it illegally, meaning M. Arrighi.³ He also wrote to Des Granges on 24 January about the piece of Annie Petersen's land the latter wanted to buy to build an office:

I regret that at present she cannot sell portions of the property. However she would be willing to consider an offer for the whole property including the beach-front. The

relatively high value of the franc as compared with sterling or Australian is favourable for business.⁴

Referring to his quarrel with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in the Group, E.G. Seagoe at the British Residency reminded Kerr to send a statement about the Makapai land 'which you sold in 1912 back to the boys and which the French Co. is now claiming. I should like to get the caveat in before the Court goes into Vacation'. Unfortunately Kerr did not receive Seagoe's letter in time to forward the required affidavit before the Court closed.⁵

On 3 February Vibert provided Aupied in Paris with the following report updating his file on Kerr Bros. Ltd.

Further investigations disclose that the Company is well-known as a supplier to the Pacific Islands, also figuring largely as importers of island products. Purchases on the local market have all along been effected promptly in 30 days. From time to time the company has financed consignments handled by its clients in the Islands. Of the directors. G.L.S. Kerr has been connected with the business since its inception. He is regarded as being in a responsible position financially.⁶

Graham Kerr knew nothing of this. In fact there is nothing in his diary for the early part of this year dealing with the momentous events, which would so much affect his future, taking place in Paris at this time.

At the other end of the globe in Sydney it was the usual hectic round of family outings, which included his late brother James Walter Kerr's son and daughter Walter and Bess Kerr; entertaining friends and clients from the New Hebrides and generally getting along with life at a time of increasingly depressed trade. Copra, the main source of plantation income was down to just over seven pounds a ton which is why Graham Kerr promoted more lucrative ways of using it such as to make coconut margarine and why he was hunting out the necessary machinery to make coconut products.

Graham Kerr tried selling coconuts to fruit shops in Sydney. The Chevrolet would have its rear passenger-seating temporarily removed and a truck body installed and George Millar and Ray Ball from the office would go on their rounds. All Kerr's children were still at school except the eldest and everyone at the office needed a job so anything to bring in money was tried.⁷

He was still hunting for a flat for the young Ratards and eventually found one for them at Lindfield. They did not stay there long however, returning to Noumea on *Commissaire Ramel* on 25 January.

On 1 February Kerr Bros. Ltd was appointed agents for Davison Products for New Hebrides, New Caledonia and the Wallis Islands. Visits were paid to Smalls, Stedman-Henderson's, White Signet Ltd, Nestlé's and MacRobertson's to try and find markets for the cacao from Hog Harbour plantation and other New Hebridean clients. Muriel and Graham, on a trip to Martinsville to see Muriel's two sisters, went via Newcastle taking George Millar, hoping while there 'to look up likely coconut people'. On 13 February the Annual Meeting of East Santo Plantations was held at Kerr Bros Office. 'Not a good year at all—I am afraid we were taken down badly by Evans.'⁸

On 21 February Muriel and Graham Kerr went to a lecture at Kings Hall by R.W.G. MacKay, MA LLB on 'Australia and the new economic order—with special reference to Russian and American experiments'. These were momentous times. The Russian experiment was with communism which did not encourage individual initiative and the American one with capitalism which did. Graham found the lecture 'very interesting'.

But it was now time to visit New Hebrides again and inspect the plantation now leased to Jean My. Graham Kerr left on *Morinda* on 20 March with, as usual, all of us who were not at school, to see him off.

Just before he left, he received a letter from the Directors of *Maison Barrau* in Noumea enclosing a Power of Attorney for Monsieur E. Barrau and Monsieur A. Sauzade to represent him at meetings of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris. He immediately wrote off to Ernest Barrau, in Marseilles telling him that he would send him the necessary authority to represent him when he returned from New Hebrides.

After calling at Lord Howe and Norfolk islands they arrived in Vila on 29 March where he called on many people including Mr Joy, Mr Seagoe and Mr Keegan in the British Residency Office. 'Vila seems to be in a very bad way, except for the officials' he wrote. It was a sore point that while making a bare living was hard for planters those working for the Condominium government, which did so little for them, were assured of their pay.

On 15 February he had written to Joy to see if *Laperouse* could call at Hog Harbour on her way south from Indo-China to Vila in June next. Joy told him that *Messageries Maritimes* had already granted *Laperouse* permission to enter the Group at the Segond Channel, subsequently calling at Hog Harbour on her way to Vila. 'On no account can she call at Hog Harbour prior to entry at Segond Channel'. Ridiculous on the face of it, as she had to sail right passed Hog Harbour on her way to Segond.⁹

Morinda left for the north of the Group the same day, calling at Bushman's Bay, Mallekula, but not staying for long as there was no business, then to Duindui. After finishing with the Purdys, they went to Lolowai 'A very pretty place' where he had never been before.¹⁰ The next stop was Tangoa, the New Hebrides Mission station, then to Port Latour on Aore and afterwards to Wells' plantation on Malo before stopping at Segond Channel at Ratard's. The ship finally berthed further up the Channel at the Dart Anchorage. 'Many people came on board, including ones I wanted to see'. After some wait Francois came on board for him and on Salisbury's launch they left for My's plantation; Sara near Shark Bay.

Graham Kerr found Mme. My in poor health and invited her to stay at our home in Sydney as a change from the unhealthy climate of Santo but she had already arranged to go to Noumea. After discussing East Santo Plantations matters with Jean My they left for Hog Harbour where they found 'Inskip well, but Reynolds down with fever—blow last week was rather severe, but not much damage done at H.H'.¹¹

Mark Reynolds was really ill, so Kerr could not reproach him for the mess he found at the plantation Store. On 7 April he remarked in his diary that after attending to the Store in the afternoon, 'towards evening had a game of tennis, Marshall of the Oxford Expedition making up a four' No further comment, but there will be more about Jock Marshall later in the chapter.

Laperouse arrived on 9 April with goods from Sydney but no consignees' letters, which had gone astray. When the ship left that evening, part of the cargo was 1190 sacks of coconuts and 128 of copra for Sydney. Mme. My was also on board on her way to Noumea to try and recover her health. The British District Agent, T.R.F. Salisbury, who represented the Condominium Government at Hog Harbour, was also very ill in Vila at this time. After putting things in order during his previous visit, Graham Kerr found management at Hog Harbour again very slipshod.

Buying quantities of things from B.P. is no good to us—they bought 8 sacks of flour and I find 12 sacks on hand still when the new lot arrived by *Laperouse*. Housekeeping by tin-opener is costing us very dear.

Reynolds was still sick but Inskip was now better. However further inspection did not improve matters:

They have things in a devil of a mess ... when we broke in the mare, when I was here before, we were going to use her daily for overseeing, so I sent some bran and lucerne chaff from Sydney for her. She died however and the feed was thrown on the ground in a damp corner of an old shed, and left to rot, instead of feeding it to the milking cows or the bran to the fowls—heaps of starch in Store room, more starch ordered and lying unused ... these untrained slovenly people are impossible... Garden seed sent from Sydney and Inskip had a marvellous brainwave to plant on Elephant Island ... ridiculous to plant there when it means a day's journey and a launch to get there and back. [He would soon find out that Inskip had method in his madness].

He was further discouraged to find the books six months behind. 'The people here are suffering from acute tinopenneritis; they would die alongside plenty... I am satisfied that Bank Clerks ought to stick to Banks and leave plantations alone.' Perhaps Inskip had held that job before going to New Hebrides? Kerr was very discouraged. On 14 April after a very busy day attending to this and that and,

in the afternoon, paying the labourers and opening the Store, he wrote 'I am sure that with a little intelligent interest in the work, anyone could make this place pay even now with copra almost given away—very tired, bed early but not sleeping well'. The weather also did not help. It was very hot and showery. On 19 April he went for a walk with Inskip to see Marshall of the Oxford Expedition.

On 21 April he was up at 3.30 am and went across to Sakau Island to take provisions and to see what the labour were doing. He found they were doing as well as could be expected under the circumstances and better than letting the place go back to bush. On the way back from Sakau he decided to call in at Elephant Island. Here he found that

Inskip had built a shack and put in quite a lot of work there, apparently with our labour. Tackled him about it and he said he only took the labour on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, paying them for it. This I found out afterwards was a deliberate lie ... I am putting him off to-day—squared him up and took him and his belongings to Salisbury's where he is installing himself. [Salisbury was ill in Vila].

Inskip is quite a useless character with no stability and when put in charge, suffered from the 'Big fellow-master' idea. He is quite hopeless to have in charge to meet the present situation—found out his deliberate lie during the afternoon.

It so happened that 21 April was also my parents' 25th wedding anniversary. Graham Kerr wondered

... what M [Muriel] has been doing today and how they are all getting on—wish I was home—will see it through though ... some trials and tribulations but a good deal of happiness too, since then—it would be happiness now except for the loss of our two girlies—that thought has spoilt to-day—dwelling on things.

The two 'girlies' were Jean, drowned in 1912 and Isabel who died of diphtheria in Sydney in 1925. If only my father could have unbent with his children. If only he really talked to us instead of 'at' us. None of us except Nancy, our little sister, ever felt near him. My mother used to tell us that we really did not know him. She was right. With too many worries with no solutions, including those in France and now the Inskip business, he was showing that he was a human after all and not just the kind of automaton who could react with ease to all situations. But what use was that if only his diary knew?

Not long afterwards Jock Marshall, with some of his Indigenous helpers, visited Ladhu or Elephant Island situated nearly three miles from Hog Harbour. Mentioning no names Marshall wrote, 'Some months previously a rude shack had been thrown up near the beach. It had been built by a young plantation manager, who, fearing, that he was about to lose his position, conceived the brilliant scheme of using the plantation labour to clear a small patch of the island and build a hut on it for possible future residence'.¹² It must have been common knowledge to everyone in the area. Marshall came down to the plantation to tennis on 22 April and stayed to dinner.

Showing that he, unlike Inskip, was prepared to take on whatever job needed doing, however lowly, Kerr worked through the next days with the labour collecting coconuts and transporting them by truck to where they could be split under cover, as it was hot and showery.

25 April was 'a nice day at last, with S. E. Wind'. After checking the labour out to their various jobs he went in the government launch to Port Olry

... taking Reynolds for the run as it may help him to shake off his sickness. Got some good orders from Harbulot, called at *Père Audouin's* on the way home.

Reynolds did seem to benefit for the trip but now it was Kerr's turn to succumb to fever. By 29 April he was not feeling very well but put in a good morning on mail for Sydney. He put in a wretched night on 30 April.

I was bound to get infected with all these people here with their tin-poisoned blood making them an easy prey to malaria. Put in a bad day. However everything was attended to.

He sent Reynolds up to Port Olry to Harbulot's thinking that Naturel's craft was there and that Reynolds might be able to get a passage with Naturel to Second Channel to meet up with both *Morinda* and *Laperouse* as they passed Hog Harbour on the way south. Kerr also wanted to see if Naturel would 'take some of our smoke-dried copra and sell it for us'.¹³ When Reynolds returned he was fever-ridden again and Naturel's vessel had not arrived at Harbulot's.

On 3 May Kerr went to Second in Salisbury's launch taking 'two of our boys and one of Salisbury's'.¹⁴ Francois was also on board, ill. When they reached the Channel, they went to the French Hospital with him. 'Poor chap has had a bad time coming down—a long time before we could get attention'. On 5 May when Kerr went to pick Francois up the doctor wanted to keep him another week.

Showing what havoc the steamy climate could cause, Marshall wrote about what he found after returning in early May from Big Bay to Hog Harbour.¹⁵

Everyone appeared to have some complaint ... Fever, of course; ... Francois, the plantation half-caste, had lung trouble, the book-keeper [Reynolds] was covered with a particularly detestable outbreak of sores that attracted myriads of black ants which resolutely attacked him in bed and on the bench.

Kerr's homeward trip from Second to Hog Harbour was not made until 6 May as he waited for mail from *Morinda* which arrived after *Laperouse* left for Hog Harbour with cargo. While in Second Channel he was asked by M. Lestel, Ballandes local manager, to stay the night. Three men from a French Expedition—the leader a Frenchman and the two others from Britain and New Zealand—were also guests. Another night was spent, not on the uncomfortable launch, but staying with Auguste Houchard who Graham Kerr considered to be 'a very fine fellow'.

Back on the job at Hog Harbour, he sent one of his 'boys' with a letter to Jean My at Sara plantation. He was awaiting a message from Jean My. Kerr wrote:

If all is in order I shall ship copra per *Messageries Maritimes'* *Bucephale* calling at Hog Harbour about the 16th instant. In case of shipment being made, I shall send particulars to you immediately so that you will be able to obtain Certificates to send on to Messrs Th. and Ed. Jullien in Marseilles.

From another letter to Jean My I gathered that the lease of Hog Harbour to My had not yet been registered by the French Resident Commissioner. I think we had better wait for the Resident to advise us ... *oui ou non*. If we send another radio immediately, they will think we are tremendously anxious to have the matter through. We are too, but we must wait for them to accept or reject.

We have copra ready for the *Bucephale* but it is useless to ship unless we know there will be '*detaxe*' [the French concession]. What I would prefer to do is to sell this lot, if any reasonable price offering. Perhaps Ballandes [CFNH] would offer a price loaded on board the *Bucephale*?

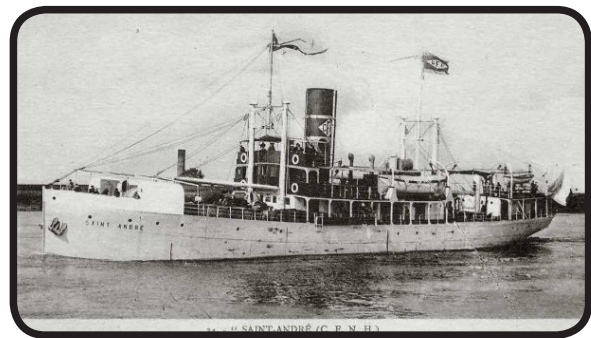


Photo 53: *Bucéphale* ex *St André* built in 1925 for *Compagnie Ballande* and later bought by *Compagnie Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CFNH). In 1932 it was bought by *Messageries Maritimes* for inter island runs in the New Hebrides and collecting copra in the islands. Lost on 14 June 1937 in Téouma Bay, south west Efate. Information and photo from Roland Klinger's website 'The New Hebrides: Postal History & Stamps' at <http://www.ro-klinger.de/NH/1-ph1934-02-10.htm>

He asked My if he would write to M. Lestel at the Canal. 'It [would] be better for you to write to him as the place is awaiting registration in your name'. He needed to know if possible by 15 May as *Bucephale* was due in Hog Harbour about then. Only if registration of Hog Harbour to My was accepted, was "*de-taxe*" payable. Otherwise it would be taxed in France as of 'foreign origin', unless he could sell to Lestel.

He ended the letter inviting Jean and his wife and her sister Mlle. Russ and their baby to visit Hog Harbour. 'We would be very glad to see you and would make you as comfortable as possible'.

On 10 May, after turning out the labour to their various jobs, Kerr went north to Port Olry to deliver goods to Harbulot and then across to Sakau where he collected all the labourers working there, except for one family, and returned to Hog Harbour in the late afternoon. Here he found the three members of the French Expedition he had met just previously at Segond Channel 'and got them fixed up for the night'.

The next day Reynolds took the Expedition members up to Marshall's station on their way to Port Olry. They returned and asked if they could go there in Salisbury's launch instead. Kerr, very busy organising gangs to collect coconuts and with just about everything else to attend to as well, resulting from Reynolds' illness and Inskip's bad management, told them that if they could wait he would take them there himself next day, which he did.

On 13 May he was busy in the Store as it was pay day. He was also serving customers. Marshall came down to dinner again. Kerr: 'Very tired—difficult to even find time to shave. Next day the *Bucephale* arrived. Salisbury who had been ill was back.¹⁶ Bishop Douceré was on his way to Port Olry. Most of the day spent out in the truck bringing in nuts. Graham Kerr was busy getting a cargo hopefully to send by *Messageries Maritimes* to France.

Reynolds now became very ill and Kerr took him up to Port Olry in Salisbury's launch to board the *Bucephale* to go to the French Hospital at Segond Channel where Francois was already. 'His blood it completely out of order with the Tin-opener diet of Inskip.' Marshall made one of the party with mail to give *Bucephale*.

Amongst the never-ending things to be done to get the place in order, Kerr now set two men to making a vegetable garden. This was the reason why he had sent the seeds down from Sydney that Inskip had planted at Elephant Island. He also arranged to bag nuts for Sydney. 'Busy in the Store and the books—went for a walk up to the hills before dark—bed early.'

Next morning on 20 May he found that while he slept, the French party headed by Mr Guthmann had arrived during the night. 'They camped in the kiosk—after breakfast they left for Shark Bay.'

With a staff consisting only of Reynolds and himself, Kerr was run off his feet and heavy rain made outdoor work difficult. On 23 May he had 11 men splitting nuts for others, who were cutting them up under cover but soon had to desist; except for himself. He 'got wet several times during the day, however managed to get some good work done'.

On 26 May a Saturday—always a heavy day—while he was engaged bringing the Customs records up to date, he received a letter and radio message from his partner Jean My from Segond Channel that 'Inskip's shipment of coconuts were the worst possible for quality and count per sack'. Kerr was incensed. He had taken 'the fellow's word ... contaminated before it leaves his mouth'. Inskip had guaranteed a minimum of 96 nuts to the sack—'Some only made 70 odd' and the quality was bad... Has done us tremendous harm naturally'. How would this affect registration of Hog Harbour to Jean My and his ability to get '*detaxe*' on the consignments? Adversity made Kerr more determined to succeed. However slippery the roads had become because of the rain, making it difficult to bring loads of nuts to the sheds, they would be prepared properly this time. On 28 May he first

... arranged labour—carting nuts nearly all day. An American schooner yacht came in last night and is lying at anchor today. The *Makambo* came in about 11am—went on board after *dejeuner* ... to try and find out if *Morinda* will be calling here next trip—they do not know... Anderson is coming back by *Morinda*... Very busy day and, to cap all, *Père* Audouin lands along after dark for things and with orders from Harbulot—got him away by 9pm—to bed—tired.¹⁷

Next day he had to kill a bullock for rations. 'I do hate this slaughter business—had to do the shooting myself.' Fortunately his mainstay Francois was back from the hospital at Segond Channel. He had been returned to Jean My's and Salisbury's launch was sent to collect him. Francois immediately started maintenance work on *Toa*—the plantation labour recruiting vessel—which had been out of action. The weather had improved so there was increased activity bringing in nuts in the two trucks.

On 2 June after completing many necessary jobs Kerr went in Salisbury's launch up north to see Harbulot at Port Olry.

Had to go round Dolphin island as [it was] low tide—nearly dark when [we] arrived [at] Harbulots—he had launched his craft and she looks very well. He has rebuilt the cutter we took over from the Vila Cooperative—she is practically a new craft now and we got a Kelvin Engine for Harbulot.

At least he could see something to Kerr Brother's credit. And he needed it. On 6 June he received a radio from the Sydney office telling him that the *Laperouse* trip had been cancelled because the coconut market was stagnant. Also only 400 sacks were to be sent on *Morinda*

No doubt our poor demand results from the poor stuff sent along by Inskip—it is very disappointing to have between 900 and 1000 sacks of carefully-prepared nuts with guaranteed minimum of 96 to the sack, to now receive word that they can only take 400.

The French doctor had come up from Segond Channel to see Salisbury who was still not well and Kerr managed to give him a message to take back with him for Mr Martin 'the wireless man' to send off to Sydney. He now had to arrange how to store the nuts he had so busily prepared and which were no longer wanted. Reynolds, who had also been in hospital at Segond Channel, was at My's and Francois went down to collect him in Salisbury's launch. He was now 'fairly well' and able to help with the books.

It was a bad situation to have 50 tons of copra on hand, part made in February and *Laperouse* not calling. Unless the *Laperouse* picked up now it could not reach Europe much before the end of the year. Kerr wondered what had happened in Sydney to cause the cancellation. Had the Sydney Office 'lost its head'? He tried to get an urgent radio message through from Segond Channel to find out.

Reynolds and Francois went up to Port Olry to see Harbulot on 10 June while Kerr turned his attention to Customs Declarations and other paper work to get his mind off the piled-up copra with no market. Next day, his patience, very much strained, gave out.

That confounded Reynolds laid up in afternoon; no doubt from his trip to Port Olry yesterday—he is always willing to do any job but his own—cannot keep him at anything. Much to clean up before arrival of steamer and it looks as if I will have to do it all myself.

During the wait for a reply from Sydney the nut gathering went at a reduced pace. But there was plenty of other work on hand. Harbulot came in with his 'new ship, the vessel looks very well in seagoing trim'. Bayne from Big Bay was also on board. They were on their way to Segond.¹⁸

The message from Sydney was unsatisfactory. 'Sydney entirely failed to grasp the situation and their reply was no answer whatever.' I wonder if the message sent off was garbled. Communication was very primitive at that time. *Morinda* was due and Kerr had arranged to leave with her for Vila. On 16 June Harbulot arrived back from Segond Channel bringing the Coulon family from Shark Bay with him to shop in the plantation store. They were all put up for the night 'the men going on board to sleep and the ladies having the spare room ashore'. *Morinda* arrived next day:

Teeming rain most of the morning, making it very awkward working cargo. Am afraid we got many coconuts wet going off—luckier with the copra.

With Graham Kerr on board, *Morinda* left for Aoba soon after midday. At Duindui he saw Purdy. 'He is anxious for me to represent the British on my visit to Joy.' The reason he was going to Vila was to try and arrange with the British Resident, Sir George Joy, for British planters to receive the same concession granted to French planters by their Resident Commissioner. I don't think he was very hopeful. He made an appointment with Joy and received an urgent message from Marius Jocteur that he wanted to see him at his plantation at Mélé. He went down with Albert Jocteur, one of Marius' sons and stayed the night. 'They have a nice comfortable home. Mme. Jocteur is very nice.'

How different this was from the womanless set-up at Hog Harbour. Kerr was now seriously considering the idea of turning East Santo Plantations into a French company with Jean My's help. Perhaps Marius Jocteur might be able to provide staff? The current situation could not continue. Back to Vila next morning and along

... to B.P.s and Mr Smith and I went to interview Mr Joy... in Smith's car. [Even Burns Philp, allied with the Australian government, was badly hurting]. Really not much satisfaction to be got from Mr Joy—he says that the French Commissioner here and the High Commissioner in New Caledonia are entirely in favour of the French duty on all copra from New Hebrides being lifted and they are working to that end. Tried to nail Joy down to something definite as far as the British Government is concerned—however it does not seem that the British Government will ever do anything to justify remaining in the New Hebrides.

His visit had been in vain. He called on various people on business and had dinner with the Keegans. 'Thelma is looking very well.' She had just produced a son. The rest of his short stay before going north again in *Bucephale* was spoiled by heavy rain. *Laperouse* arrived from the north but he could not find out if she had called at Hog Harbour to pick up copra. The *Messageries Maritimes* vessel *Esperance* was also in port 'to leave this weekend for Noumea and from there through Torres Straits and to France'.

Before leaving Vila he

... got rid of some Australian silver to B.P.s for notes, squared the Customs and ... gave Arrighi notice that he is occupying land belonging to Annie Petersen.

On the way north *Bucephale* visited places Graham Kerr had not seen for years for instance, Tonga, which he had sold to George Crocker about eight years earlier. They reached Craig Cove Ambrym on 24 June and on to Ranon:

First time I have been close along the shore here since the eruption [of December 1913], except in the *Pacifique* just following the eruption. What a tragic thing ... for Bowie, Carmichael, and the rest at Dip Point! Dip Point is altered tremendously but the inlet from the sea seems to have closed up. Where the hospital used to be, now seems to be a hill of loose sand and scoria.

When they reached Truchy Point Pentecost Island, George Purdy came on board and Kerr gave him letters he had prepared for his father and Fleming on Malekula, 'about French duty and what we British are going to do about it'—but not the news they hoped for. When they reached Second Channel Tonkinese labourers were landed before *Bucephale* left for the Banks Group. Then they went to Port Olry and Hog Harbour where 652 sacks of copra were shipped for Marseilles.

It was immediately back to work. He found that *Père* Audouin was staying the night. With only Reynolds and himself to see to everything, it was an impossible task, especially as Reynold's heart was not in the job. There were coconuts everywhere and although markets were scarce or non-existent they must not go to waste. Extra dryers must be set up to save as many as possible. On 28 June he wrote, after he had gone out for a load of timber for the improvised dryers, 'worrying time today—copra is not much value but I hate to see nuts go to waste, particularly after all the trouble we took with these

particular ones'. Reynolds had allowed all the already carefully selected and bagged nuts waiting for collection, to be tipped out, and the sun was causing them to break open and decay.

At the same time all the plantation books had to be up to date for the end of the financial year and getting new books ready for the next year, as well as stocktaking, so it was a matter of rushing from one job to the next. On 2 July he arranged for Francois to take 38 labourers across to Sakau in *Toa* to put it in order. On Sunday 8 July 'shortly before noon, HMS *Diomedé* came in. She is from the New Zealand Station. After lunch Reynolds and I went off to pay our respects to the Commander'. He was out sailing so they were seen by the Second-in-Command:

Next day the Commander sent an invitation ashore for Reynolds and I to have lunch on board. We went off about 12.30—had a very pleasant time. The Commander, Captain Farquhar, is a very nice fellow. His father had been here in 1899 in command of HMS *Wallaroo* and did some survey work. The point near Anderson's landing is named after him. Ashore soon after 2pm with a crowd of officers to go to one of the Native Villages. I am sending Reynolds and guides with them.

Next day, 10 July, Reynolds boarded the *Diomedé* regarding Francois' wireless set and to act as interpreter in pigeon English when bush natives went on board. *Diomedé* left just before dark for the Gilbert and Ellice islands.

When Graham Kerr arrived in the Hebrides as a young man in 1894, ships of the Royal Naval Australia Station, with its headquarters in Sydney, made regular patrols through the Group and provided valuable reports. This was a thing of the past. With the British Foreign Office job at Noumea being reduced from that of a career diplomat to a trade posting in 1908, and the Royal Navy moving its headquarters to New Zealand after Federation the Colonial Office was in full command. To British settlers who remembered back to earlier times it was a very doubtful improvement.

Tom Harrison, aged 23, who worked for the Oxford Expedition with Jock Marshall at Hog Harbour, also wrote about the *Diomedé's* visit. He

... happened to meet H.M.S *Diomedé*. I came aboard with no shoes, one year's growth of hair. At the time it never struck me as a curious thing to do! Captain Cosmo Graham talked the first fresh white talk I had heard ... Just a year later, I met an intelligent white man again ... This time I floated into Tahiti, the only passenger on an overluxury yacht. There was the *Diomedé* again; those tolerant officers filled me up with enough gin to last me a year.¹⁹

Captain Graham must have been the Second in Command on the first visit. I wonder what Captain Farquhar would have made of him? Harrison, an upper-class Englishman with no particular qualifications himself, had no time for the white 'colonials' he met in the New Hebrides. His 23 year old Baker Expedition companion Jock Marshall, himself a 'colonial' with a science degree, had this to say. 'Hog Harbour was about to experience great events'—one of them being the arrival of the *Diomedé*—'Britain was to make another rare—and futile—gesture to show her nationals that they were not completely forgotten, by despatching a warship from New Zealand to

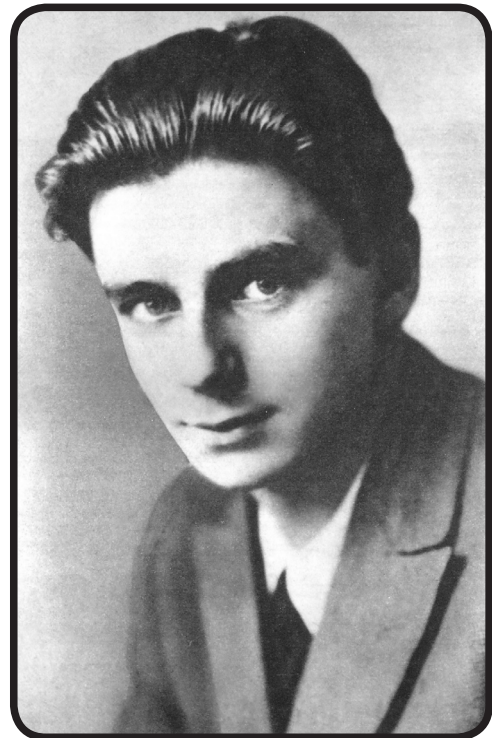


Photo 54: Tom Harrison, Oxford University Expedition. Photo from *The New York Times Book Review* on 31 October 1937. He was part of the Oxford University Expedition to Espiritu Santo in 1933–4 and was later joined by Jock Marshall an Australian.

sail through the Group'.²⁰ Surely a more intelligent observation than that made by Harrisson and more to the point.

On 14 July many time-expired plantation labourers were ready to be repatriated. Francois was to take them in *Toa* dropping off 18 others at Sakau to continue clearing up. *Toa* was to go on to Meralav, then to Lakona (Gaua Island, Banks Group) and Mota and so on to the Torres, returning from there to Hog Harbour. Graham Kerr wrote:

It is ridiculous that we have to send the vessel all the way to Torres to land a woman, whose husband there—(protem, [sic])—had reported to the Melanesian Missionary that *Toa* had taken the woman away. This rascal of a boy had cleared her out, after knocking her about terribly and saying he wanted another woman. Have had to force the woman to go back—she will just skip off with the first ship calling at the Torres. If these Missionaries set themselves up to police the Group they should be compelled to verify the actual position of things.

He intended to write to the Resident Commissioner and the Missionary concerned. For all the good that would do. This is another of the many cases of women running away from cruel 'owners' with those who gave them jobs being accused of kidnapping. Missionaries refused to accept that Western style marriage formed no part of Indigenous culture. Women were merely possessions of their men to be bought or sold at will, as was common knowledge.

Bucephale came in on 19 July and some copra was shipped. Graham Kerr had improved a kiln for smoke-drying it, by putting in a chimney made from oil drums. He had hoped for mail from home. Nothing 'terribly disappointed' and Reynolds was again sick. The weather did not help 'everlasting rain'. *Toa* returned on 23 July 'after an uneventful trip'. Harbulot was luckier he called in on his way home from a recruiting trip with 32 recruits. There is mention of the blue flower pest that was over-running the plantation and making it difficult to pick up fallen nuts.²¹ Something would have to be done to eradicate it.

On 26 July Kerr and Francois in *Toa* went across to Sakau to see how the clearing up in the coconut and castor seed plantations were going and next day all 18 labourers were brought back to Hog Harbour. My father was hoping that castor seed production would make up some of the loss felt by the copra slump. Saturday was given over to a social visit to Shark Bay to see the Coulons.

Reynolds, Francois and I, with *Toa* crew, ran down in the vessel, arriving just after dark—my first visit to Shark Bay. Went ashore and was welcomed by Victor Coulon and his nieces. Staying the night.

Next day they went further south to see Jean My and his family at Sara, accompanied by Victor Coulon whom they dropped off at Shark Bay on the way back. As usual they were made welcome by Jean with whom Graham discussed business. Back at Hog Harbour he was gradually getting things in order. He had 'cupboards built on back veranda to keep medicines in proper order and handy for treating the sick'. On 5 August he went up to Port Olry in *Toa* to see Harbulot about the small plantation truck and the machinery for dealing with castor oil seed. He sold the truck to him and arranged to share the cost of the castor machine, both parties using it there. 'Port Olry is a convenient shipping port for produce from Sakau.'

On 8 August *Laperouse* arrived with the governor of New Caledonia and the French Commissioner from Vila on board. They did not come ashore and the vessel left that night. They did learn that the Government Agency, where Salisbury was in charge, was in a dreadful state of disrepair and reported the matter to the British Resident when they reached Vila. Joy immediately contacted Graham Kerr and asked if he would take the matter in hand. In the report on Hog Harbour Graham Kerr left with Hugh Kerr before returning to Sydney in early September, he wrote

... the state of the buildings and the fences is the Government's own fault for not spending a little money to keep them up ... The d---d Police they had there, getting about

4 pounds per month, could very well have kept the fences in repair. It is worth our while to help the government all we can, they paying for the labour, of course.

Graham Kerr was back on Sakau on 15 August with 24 labour and 7 women. Francois and Reynolds were also on board. The women were put to picking castor seed 'but the place is very overgrown'. As there was a good crop it was the first place to be put in order.

If that fool Dupertuis hadn't got in a panic and slashed down castor plants instead of planting castor, there would have been hundreds of pounds [money] worth of seed at present.

Kerr finally decided to send most of the labour from Hog Harbour across to Sakau with Reynolds and Francois to supervise. He was putting all efforts into the production of castor seed although he neglected neither coconuts nor cacao.

By 1 September Reynolds, Francois and all the labour were back from Sakau. Next day 'Mat Wells' cutter came in with Wells, Dubois and Robertson on board. They came ashore to breakfast. Wells and Dubois left after breakfast, Robertson staying'. Another visitor was Harbulot from Port Olry on a recruiting trip. On 6 September Kerr put some women on the job pulling up the blue flower where it was only in small patches while Francois was running the truck collecting coconuts. 'Reynolds and I went up to Anderson's at 4pm to afternoon tea' and probably to say good bye as he was about to return to Sydney.

He waited all day for *Morinda* to arrive. 'Could not settle down to anything while waiting. Towards evening ran out to the Point in the Truck to see if any sign—stopped at the government Agency on the way back and then she came'. It was 9 September and his brother D.H. Kerr came ashore with several passengers. After dinner he handed over a detailed list to his brother of what he had done and what needed to be done and went on board. Among the passengers must have been the author Colin Simpson. In a book he wrote years later, in 1955:

The night the *Morinda* pulled in Hog Harbour, to pick up copra and unload D.H. Kerr of Kerr Bros. big plantation on the shores of this Santo inlet, a launch came alongside.

In it was Jock Marshall. Simpson's 'considerable admiration for Jock Marshall is, or was, tempered by only one observation: he has, or had, a most ungodly taste for lemon squash in his beer'.²²

Simpson wrote that Marshall 'was wearing an old black beret, a bush of golden-fair hair, shirt, shorts and sandals' I had been wondering why, despite Marshall's scruffy appearance he was always welcome at the plantation while my father was there. The latter was no teetotaler but overindulgence was abhorrent to him. There certainly was a drink problem in the New Hebrides, but not for Marshall.

Morinda called at Aoba before going to Second Channel and then on 'to Aore, Port Latour, then to Matt Wells on Malo and from there to Tangoa... We have Bob Watson and Sam Wells on board, leaving the Group'. *Morinda* reached Vila on 13 September. Here Kerr 'called on the French Commissioner and had a cordial conversation regarding So-



Photo 55: 'Hunting' The original photo, taken by C.S. Simpson, includes A.J. Marshall (Jock) and a hunter who is unnamed. It is the frontispiece in A.J. Marshall, *The Black Musketeers: The Work and Adventures of a Scientist on a South Sea Island at War and in Peace*, London, William Heinemann, 1937 and was re-photographed by the editor without permission.

ciété Française des Nouvelles Hébrides and also regarding French duty on copra'. He called on Mr Joy, the British Commissioner; about the government Agency at Hog Harbour, the Petersen property and the export value of copra—French and British. When the ship left Vila Mr and Mrs Wallace were on board also leaving the Group.

Graham Kerr was home in Sydney on 20 September the day before his 61st birthday. He was interviewed by a reporter from the *Sun* which published an article titled 'Hard Hit. British Interests in Hebrides. Planter's Plea.' on 21 September 1934.

'If Great Britain or Australia will do nothing for their planters in the New Hebrides, this group of islands may as well be handed over to the French', said Mr Graham Kerr, who returned to Sydney last night by the *Morinda* ... "The present situation ... is impossible as far as British interests are concerned. Markets are closed to them. British products, principally copra, are hit by crippling duty if shipped to France, and if they are shipped to Australia, the highest rate of duty is imposed, notwithstanding that the principal wants to the New Hebrides are obtained from or through Australia ... Australia could help matters by allowing British products to enter Australia on the same footing as products from other countries coming under the terms of the Ottawa Agreement.' Messrs Robt. Watson and S. Wells, two Australian planters at South Santo, who have given up their plantations owing to the unfavourable position of British-produced copra, supported Mr Kerr's statements. *Their return on the Morinda yesterday leaves only two Australian planters remaining at South Santo where there were originally 21.* [Emphasised in the original]. 'Although we are Australians, on plantation land owned by the Australian Government, we have been treated as foreigners', they said.²³

At the beginning of the century the Australian government had handed over territory acquired from the old Australian New Hebrides Company when it became Burns Philp and Company in 1898 for Burns Philp to administer. This was done to counteract increasing French colonisation but was not very successful. Both Watson²⁴ and Wells²⁵ had taken advantage of the offer and were among the very few who had lasted the distance.

According to Graham Kerr's diary on 5 October he wrote to the Comptroller-General, Department of Trade and Customs. He expanded on the newspaper article above in a letter to D.H Kerr at Hog Harbour written on 10 October.

There was quite 'a bit' about New Hebrides in the papers from me ... in Sydney and Melbourne papers and Broadcast. I had a letter from the Comptroller-General of Customs at Canberra about the matter. He says that his department is studying some method of assisting British production in New Hebrides. He asked ... how the French Government are assisting their nationals.

Kerr thought that being directly questioned in this way he was able to make more impact than if he had made the first approach:

It would be a pity if Australia starts to discriminate against French production in N.H. and I told them so. It would give France a good excuse to retain her duty on British grown N.H. products. Australia cannot supply a market for Copra, but could for Cacao. Unfortunately there is no British-grown Cacao at present. I pointed out that if the 1/- per cwt duty on coconuts was lifted it would help.

It would have to be a reciprocal agreement. If France would be prepared to grant *detaxe* to both French and British planters in the New Hebrides would Australia do the same?

On 22 October he was most impressed when 'Scott and Black arrived at Darwin in their Comet machine in 52 hours, 32 minutes from England ... in the greatest air race in history'. Graham Kerr

always thought what a marvellous thing air transport would be for the New Hebrides rather than slow shipping and uncertain radio contact.

On 14 October Mme. My, the widow of Emile My wrote to him asking him if he had a duplicate of the document setting up East Santo Plantations as they did not have one. It was needed so that the French Residency could arrange payment of the bonuses due to Emile My's heirs. He complied with a document which should fix things. He wanted to know if Monsieur Jean had heard

... anything definite regarding the lifting of duty in France on British Copra from New Hebrides ... The price still keeps shockingly low, and if that 175 francs per ton was not in operation, the situation would look much better ... I am trying to move the Government here to admit New Hebrides produce under preferential rates of duty—both British and French, without discrimination. We used to sell many hundreds of tons of Cacao here until there was a duty of 4 pounds 13 shillings and 4 pence per ton put on it.

Mme. My had asked whether a job for Mlle. Maddy Russ, Jean's sister-in-law, could be found in Kerr Bros. Sydney office. At present Mme. Dale, sister of Robert Kuter and married to an Englishman who was badly injured in the First World War did the Kerr Brothers French correspondence, but Graham Kerr said he would 'try to arrange to have [Mlle. Russ] here'. He also said there 'are signs of business improving and if only copra would show some lift up, the outlook would be much better' and that he was 'hoping to see the French duty lifted'.

With copra the main product of Hog Harbour plantation and castor seed not yet in full production, he needed help from somewhere. Patience was necessary and it was wearing thin.

Walter Lister Kerr, son of James Walter Kerr Jr my father's eldest brother who died in 1912, was the Auditor and Accountant for East Santo Plantations and his report for the financial year to 30 June 1934 painted a grim picture.

Copra production for the year shows a marked decrease compared with the previous year ... The underproduction of copra can be accounted for in the supplies of coconuts which increased to a very large extent during the year, but, owing to the very weak state of the market and the competition from Fiji and other places where planters are given concessions denied the New Hebridean planters, the disposal was extremely disappointing.

We found our father very touchy and unapproachable when he returned from his stint at Hog Harbour, knowing that his brother D.H. Kerr was no longer prepared to take over permanent management there. I was almost sixteen when he arrived home and having read articles on the Oxford University Expedition in the newspapers I eagerly approached him on the subject, only to be told about the scruffy young layabouts he had met who drank too much and did nothing useful that he could see. I now think his opinion was much coloured by the irresponsible doings of another lay about—Inskip. I was very disappointed and in my innocence, disbelieving. My father was so old. What would he know? He was 61 and since 1894 his life had been centred on the New Hebrides. Now I am very much older than that and somewhat less innocent—or perhaps more knowledgeable would be the better word—I am less sure.

But at least the young 'layabouts' presented a different picture of the New Hebrides, and in the case of Jock Marshall a very illuminating one. I now believe that both Marshall and Harrison had a very pronounced and prejudiced picture of New Hebrides' past history especially as regards the New Hebrides Mission. Marshall's point of view, naturally, was quite different from that of a planter immersed in trying to make a plantation pay its way during the Depression, in a place that belonged no nobody, not even its own Indigenous people, in a Condominium of England and France where France helped her nationals and England did not.



Photo 56: Illustration called Rain-Forest drawn by Dr John Baker, the leader of the Oxford Expedition, used in Tom Harrison's *Savage Civilization*, p.19. This was photographed from *Savage Civilization* by the editor (without permission) to give a sense of another kind of British imagination at work in New Hebrides.

Graham Kerr's young family brought up in Australia, like most Australians, knew very little about the place in which he earned our living and that made him so angry. The four eldest being teenagers felt they had their own lives to live.

His last diary entry for 31 December 1934 ended 'Not many people will be sorry to see 1934 go'. He did not realise at the time that 1935 would be worse.

In the beginning of same year, 1934, in distant Paris a state of turmoil existed. As Oliver Bernier wrote:

In February 1934 ... the city exploded ... Paris society and the top politicians had tried for nearly two years to ignore the real world ... For the French the Stavisky affair, which provoked the upheaval was a watershed just as the Dreyfus affair had been in its time.²⁶

By 6 February it 'looked not unlikely that the Third Republic would fall'. The citizens of Paris had had enough and 'all because of Alexandre Stavisky—a second-rate crook who had died a month earlier'.²⁷

Later when Charles Aupied with the support of the French Ministry for Colonies arranged for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to bring a law suit against Graham Kerr, the publicity given to the Stavisky swindle would cause Kerr to dub Aupied as 'another of the same ilk' and every one in France would have known what he meant, but probably not in Australia. The scandal brought down the government:

From June 1932 to February 6 1934, a period of twenty months, six cabinets held office, some for less than four weeks.²⁸

Other things were happening in Paris which André Joyer would outline for him later in the year. Things that only corroborated what Graham Kerr had warned would happen if the present management of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* were allowed to continue.

On 4 May the Minister for Colonies in the French Government and Charles Aupied representing *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* signed a Convention whereby *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* ceded 160,000 hectares of land in New Hebrides to the French Government including sea frontages and mineral rights. In return *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was to receive from the French Government 8,300,000F, of which 4,800,000F was to go to the Bank of Indo-China to repay a debt and 941,069F to go to the French part of the Condominium Government also for debt repayment.²⁹

Then, on 7 July 1934, the Government Auditor presented to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* his report on its balance sheet for the fiscal year 1933. It is enough to state here that Assets and Debts came to the same amount, the Auditor putting most of the debts down to the absorption of the three plantations companies, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* in 1930.³⁰ Graham Kerr would have put these debts down to the gross misappropriation of funds and mismanagement of these companies by their Paris Director, Charles Aupied, and his henchman in the New Hebrides, Leon Vibert.

As remarked earlier in this chapter Graham Kerr was making efforts to be represented at the annual meeting of shareholders of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*; he, being no longer a member of the *Conseil*.

On 17 December 1934 he wrote to his agents in Marseilles Th. and Ed. Jullien, with whom he was

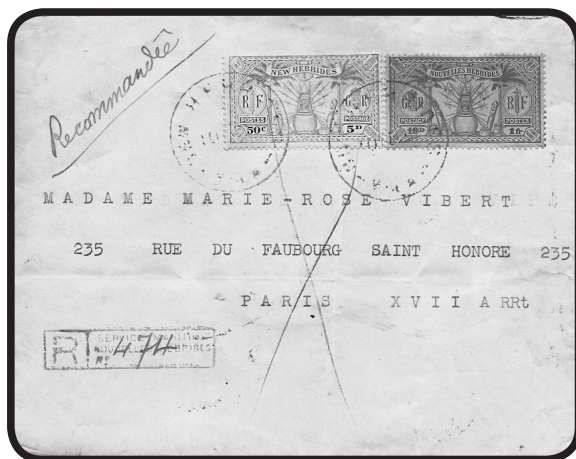


Photo 57: Letter stamped 1934 from Leon Vibert to Madame Marie-Rose Vibert (maybe his mother) with a stamp which indicates it was sent on the *Bucéphale*. (Roland Klinger database at <http://www.ro-klinger.de/NH/1-ph1934-02-10.htm>.)



Photo 58: Reverse side of 1934 letter from Leon Vibert to Madame Marie-Rose Vibert with a *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* (SFNH) wax seal.

on very good terms, asking if one of the brothers would be willing to represent him at the next General Meeting. Graham Kerr was a very large shareholder for himself and other members of his family, and told Julliens of the

... considerable unpleasantness [he had had] with other members of *Conseil*, including, principally Messieurs Aupied, and Raoul-Duval, into whose hands the control of affairs had drifted ... The French government has a very large voting strength in the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, but allows the present unsatisfactory administration to continue.³¹

He told him that his shares were nearly all *au porteur* (made out to the bearer) and at present in a safe deposit box in Paris. Perhaps they could be kept in Marseilles?³² 'I would like to be represented at the yearly General Assembly, to know what is going on, but would not ask you to make a special trip to Paris'. He needed to know what special authority would be required if the Julliens were willing. But would there in fact be a General Assembly of Shareholders?

André Joyer told him the sorry story on 22 December, after Aupied managed to have the Meeting aborted by calling it before the necessary quorum of shareholders could be assembled. Here is part of Joyer's letter, for which he offered apologies for its late arrival.

Joyer brought to Kerr's attention the letter that he and Vereecken had sent to the Minister for Colonies, Laval, about *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*' mismanagement on 31 December 1931. This was followed by Kerr's own letter to Laval on the same subject of 21 February 1933.

Joyer continued that after the Balance sheet for the fiscal sheet for 1933 was released in July 1934:

The Ministry for Colonies was informed ... of the very grave facts which happened during the last few years.

On 27 September and 29 October, I [Joyer] was summoned to the Ministry by an enquiry Commission composed of Messrs Bourgeois-Gavardin and Huet, Colony Inspectors, and Campion, Finance Inspector and Government Representative of SFNH.

These gentlemen told me that the Minister had been informed of the facts in which the chief responsibility fell to the Deputy Administrator, Mr A. [Aupied] and asked me if I knew anything about it.

I was then obliged to state with ... evidence to support my statements:

- (1) Under what conditions Mr A[upied], Administrator of all New Hebrides companies and principally of SFNH, had in May 1929, received, in terms forbidden by the law and unknown to the shareholders, a 'commission' of 1 million francs at the time of increase of capital of the SFNH from 4,200,000 million to 8,000,000.
- (2) How the same Mr. A. had, at the time, paid on this total of 1 million, an amount of about 300,000 F. to an ex-Government Commissioner with the SFNH [Tronchon] now a high official in the Ministry of Finance, so as to be assured of his influence in various business transactions; other persons besides having benefited at the time from Mr A.'s favours [Mlle Mura, his Secretary, and M. Germain, Chief Accountant SFNH and father-in-law of Aupied's daughter].
- (3) How Mr. A. had again in October 1930, and at various times in the following years, 'bribed' the same high official so that he made use of his influence and got the SFNH to benefit from a law in its favour, when collecting taxes. [On the fusion of the three plantation companies, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* in 1930 Aupied paid himself 20,000 francs for each company].
- (4) How on June 16 last [1933], this high official [Tronchon]—warned that these happenings were known to a few people—confessed to me that they were true, and begged me to intervene and to hush up the affair.
- (5) How, finally, I formally refused to hide the truth if some day it was asked of me.

All of these activities were illegal. Article 40 of the law of 24 July 1867 'forbids any administrator of companies to have directly or indirectly or personally any interest in any business transacted by the company of which he is the administrator' and also 'by articles of the Penal code which deals with "bribery" etc of government officials'.

The first effect of the evidence from Joyer

... was the withdrawal by the Ministry for Colonies—at least temporarily—of the scheme ... by which the SFNH would have sold to the State for the sum of 8,300,000F, about 160,000 hectares of land, sea frontages, mining right etc.

Joyer thought that Graham Kerr

... would readily understand the embarrassment of the *Conseil* under these conditions to call for a General Assembly of shareholders. It was with the utmost secrecy that

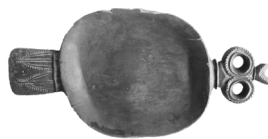
the convocation was called for 21 December. As soon as I was advised, I got into communication with Mr Leconte so that your interests would be represented; Mr Leconte, on 10 December, had therefore entrusted me with your titles, preferring not to go personally to the meeting.

But, as foreseen by the various rumours circulating lately, the *Conseil* withdrew from yesterday's meeting as soon as it had ascertained by the deposit of titles that the persons likely to be in the way [including Graham Kerr], had been warned and would be present at the meeting.

Yesterday morning, at half past 10 we only saw at the 'meeting', Mr A., Mr R.D. [Raoul-Duval] and a few of their friends. No other administrator was present, not even Mr P. [Picanon]—the President—who arrived *after* [emphasis in the original] the meeting. Mr. A. announced that 11,000 titles only were subscribed, and that another meeting would be held at a later date. Never had such a small number of shares been recorded, the Assembly always having gathered 25 to 30,000 titles of a total of 57,712. The session, which last only 20 minutes, was frigid, as you will guess, members of the SFNH feeling very uneasy.

Joyer told Kerr he was sending him the complete report of the Government Commissioner to which he had been summoned to give evidence, so that Kerr would be thoroughly up to date and that he would keep him informed of all events.³³

It is necessary to bring up a matter that was completely disregarded in France. This is that claims for all the lands and sea frontages in New Hebrides, mentioned by the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and the French Government as their property had first to be presented to the Joint Court in the New Hebrides and held there for a year in case of counter-claim of which there were many. Thus the French government was paying out money to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* that could not be guaranteed.



Endnotes

- 1 For corres. with Mme My and Jean My in this chapter see White Envelope No. 1. *Société Kerr/My* papers and My Letter File. See also White Envelope No. 12.
- 2 On 29 Jan 1934 Leconte wrote to Aupied enclosing a detailed list of what was on offer at Hog Harbour. He told Aupied that in view of the exchange rate of the Australian pound Mr Kerr accepted the reduction of his sale price of 19 million francs to 17 million 5 hundred thousand, on condition that at the time of payment the rate of the Australian pound did not go beyond the rate at 31 Oct 1933. See Paris Notebook No. 2, pp. 14-15. *Outre Mer* Archives 71 *APC SFNH Serie II*, No. 116—*affaire Kerr*.
- 3 See Yellow Folder No. 9 History of the Vysuck Estate. On 21 June Arrighi wrote to my father: 'I have received your letter informing me that I am occupying land belonging to Miss Annie Petersen. As I have rented land on a lease to SFNH ... I am sending a copy of your letter to this company. I nevertheless profit by this occasion to ask you to be willing to allow me to either rent this territory... or to sell it to me'. Annie Petersen's sea-front property formed no part of the Vila property sold to CGFH in 1927, namely Kerr Bros. Store and the house behind it. CGFH was amalgamated in 1930 with SFNH whose local Director was now Leon Vibert working directly with Charles Aupied, Deputy Director SFNH in Paris. These men were building up a law-suit against my father of which he was not yet aware.
- 4 See Yellow Folder No. 9. History of the Vysuck Estate.
- 5 See White Envelope No. 11, Wallace File under 19 March 1932 and 13 March 1934.
- 6 This report covering the dates 11 Aug 1932 to 28 Oct 1936, written in English, was found by me in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris in 1983. 71 *APC SFNH Serie II* No. 29. *Administrateur—Kerr*. See Folder 10. It was probably provided to Vibert by the French Consulate in Sydney.
- 7 Consulting records in my father's papers I found that between Dec 1930 and June 1934 the price of a sack of 'sound mature coconuts with the monkey eyes protected in the usual manner and with an average of 96 nuts to the sack' had fallen from 7 shillings to 3 shillings owing to the unfavourable Australian market. Freight and charges to get them to Australia fell to Kerr Bros. It had reached the stage when there were no takers. This is when Kerr Bros. staff tried to sell direct to fruit shops. He also this year tried through his French partner, Jean My to sell on the French market at concession rates.
- 8 I have not been able to find out what Evans did. It was probably part of the slovenly management of Hog Harbour plantation with its succession of young employees without proper supervision or knowledge of what was required to run a plantation successfully. Sending off badly prepared products which did not live up to the good name of Kerr Bros. as a reliable firm., which was so important to my father, especially as it was now leased to Jean My.
- 9 For Joy's reply see White Envelope no. 7. Corres. File No 3.
- 10 This was Frederick John Purdy who settled on Aoba in 1914. He had a son George who worked for him.
- 11 In chap VI of his book *The Black Musketeers* Lond. William Heinemann, 1937 Jock Marshall gives a vivid picture of this hurricane. See Archive Box 24 for an article by Katherine Cawsey on A.J. Marshall and Tom Harrisson
- 12 See Marshall, A.J. *The Black Musketeers*, p. 252.
- 13 Being a Frenchman, Harbulot got a concession from the French Government, unlike British planters.
- 14 Salisbury, as Condominium District Agent on Santo would have had a few members of the British Constabulary with him.
- 15 See Marshall, A.J. *The Black Musketeers*, p. 121.
- 16 Marshall wrote in his book, p. 39: 'The District Agent [Salisbury] developed his third attack of black-water fever and—amazing man—once again recovered, to everybody's astonishment'.
- 17 This was William Anderson, Presbyterian missionary and colonist who had been in the Group since 1898. In 1904 he left the New Hebrides Mission and became a planter at Undine Bay, Efate. He rejoined the Mission in 1921 and took up his station at Hog Harbour. See *Hébridais* p. 3.
- 18 Bayne had been working with W.T. Robertson who managed James Elkin Fysh's plantation on Big Bay after the latter's death in 1932. Robbie had gone there after leaving Hog Harbour which he had managed for Kerr Bros. Marshall painted a vivid picture of a tsunami that overwhelmed the Big Bay plantation in March 1934. See Marshall, A.J. *The Black Musketeers*, pp. 66-70.
- 19 See Harrisson Tom, *Savage Civilization*. N.Y. Alfred A. Knopf, 1937, p 381. The 'overluxury' yacht belonged to Douglas Fairbanks Senior, the American film idol, with whom Harrisson returned to the USA. *Savage Civilization* contains an unusual second chapter 'Persons' pp. 20-71 in which a 23 year old Harrisson sympathetically imagines the voice of a man, a native of the village of Matanavat in north Malekula, who speaks of the life and culture of his community. Harrisson's youth, imaginative life, impressionistic style of writing, arrogance and other qualities were qualities that were unlikely to be approved of by Graham Kerr and an older Katherine Cawsey. See Katherine's article on Tom Harrisson and Jock Marshall written for the Australian Friends of Vanuatu Newsletter 1/2002 and photocopies of her marginal notes from *Savage Civilization* in Archive Box 24 ed.

- 20 See Marshall, A.J. *The Black Musketeers*, 1937, p.257.
- 21 Marshall commented: “Blue flower” is another imported pest. It is a rank shrub which has swamped the near-by plantation, destroying the pasture lands, encroaching on the cleared mission property and rapidly overrunning our camp site’. See *The Black Musketeers* p. 45.
- 22 See Simpson, Colin, *Islands of Men*. Sydney, A & R., 1955, p. 126-. Simpson admired both Tom Harrisson and Jock Marshall and gave biographical details of both up to 1955. (Katherine Cawsey’s shared her father’s uncomplimentary view of Tom Harrisson. His unconventional and highly creative life is explored with great sympathy and insight in Judith M. Heimann, *The Most Offending Soul Alive: Tom Harrisson and his Remarkable Life*, United States of America, University of Hawai’i Press, 1997, 1998. Ed.)
- 23 For copy of article see Misc. File No. 3, p. 18.
- 24 See White Envelope No 2. According to Priday, H.E.L. *Island Trader*, Pt 2, p. 278, the brothers William and Robert Watson were settled by Burns Philp on Santo, circa 1902. ‘In a few years these two and their Swiss brother-in-law, S.L. Axam, [settled at Tangoa Island just south of Santo in 1904] were all that remained of the original settlers.’ Priday put it down to their inability to get labourers, made more difficult by the Presbyterian Mission.
- 25 This was Samuel Ezekiel Wells, elder brother of Mathew George Wells who had a plantation at Sanawoa, Malo, which he took up in 1902. The coconut plantation that S. E. Wells abandoned in 1934 was at Baldwin Cove, South Santo. My father saw ‘old Sam Wells’ off to New Zealand on 28 Sept 1934.
- 26 See Bernier, Oliver. *Fireworks at Dusk: Paris in the Thirties*. Boston, Little-Brown, 1993, pp. 124-125.
- 27 See Glossary of Names. This was not written (ed).
- 28 See Bernier Oliver. *Fireworks at Dusk: Paris in the Thirties*, p. 103.
- 29 See White Envelope No. 6, 4 May 1934. The full report of this Convention received by my father in Feb 1936 had a postscript resulting from a letter from SFNH [Aupied] to the Minister for Colonies [Pierre Laval] dated 23 March 1935, and approved by Cabinet 22 Nov 1935, which agreed that with a delay of no more than four months, a General Assembly should vote to change all shares *au porteur* into the nominative, the change to be ratified by the Board of SFNH [meaning Aupied].
- 30 A copy of the SFNH Balance Sheet from 1933 brought down on 7 July 1934 was included with a letter to my father from Andre Joyer dated 22 Dec 1934. See Orange Clipped Folder No. 1, Joyer Letter File.
- 31 See Orange Clipped Folder No. 2. Corres. Th. and Ed. Jullien, Marseilles 1932-1940, for letter from G.L.S. Kerr dated 17 Dec 1934. Actually the French State had a plural vote for its shares which made it the biggest shareholder.
- 32 Were Aupied and his powerful supporters already thinking up a way of confiscating the big Kerr shareholding and thus silencing my father?
- 33 This report dated in pencil ‘March 1935’ and received by my father in Sydney on 30 April 1935 is included in his papers. In his letter of 22 Dec 1934, Joyer did not mention names except that of Mr. A. I have supplied them from the above report for reasons of elucidation.

Chapter 17 1935: *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* goes Bankrupt

The events in Paris would have been foremost in Graham Kerr's mind during 1934 and through 1935, colouring his frenetic activities in Australia and the New Hebrides to put things on a more equitable footing. None of this was mentioned in his diary and was never discussed with his children. His children did notice that he was growing more aggressive towards us and our opinions, in fact to anyone who disagreed with him. Persecution was taking its toll.



Photo 59: Nancy (aged 6) and Katherine Kerr (aged 17) on the front verandah at Kermadec circa 1935 (both partly obscured)

On 4 February 1935 he received an answer from his agents in Marseilles Ed. and Th. Jullien that they would be pleased to guard his interests and also to look after his *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shares. They sometimes had business themselves in Paris and could probably arrange to be there to coincide with the general meeting of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shareholders. They must at once get ready for all contingencies.

Th. Jullien proposed giving Power of Attorney to Maurice Valette, a co-director of their firm and well acquainted with company matters. Forms would immediately be sent to Graham Kerr to fill in and have visaed by the French Consul in Sydney to give Valette that power and Kerr had to arrange for his shares to be remitted to the Julliens from Paris. Jullien wrote:



Photo 60: Three school friends from North Sydney Girls High. Left to right: Marjorie Hewison, Maureen Cullen and Katherine Kerr at the Botanical Gardens 1935

We have always treated with the utmost suspicion Colonial companies which have their HQ in Paris; it is very seldom, in fact, that these companies do not have some sort of scandalous relations with the political world. We shall therefore try to take advantage of your situation to clear things up.¹

Encouraged by this Graham Kerr wrote back on 5 February:

In view of the disadvantage in being under the British flag in New Hebrides and, on the other hand, the advantage in being under the French flag, do you think it would be possible to form a French Company in Marseilles to take over ESP's [East Santo Plantations'] interests?... If you think business could be done in Marseilles, I would send more detailed information.

The reply came back on 28 February telling him that it was not necessary that the shares be held by Frenchmen for a company to become French. This Jullien considered very interesting because, 'with the present state of the money market, of business in general, and colonial affairs in particular, it is impossible to find buyers for shares in a business like yours'. I wonder whether this was a result of the recent very public bankruptcy of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. He continued:

We believe that it would be well ... to try and make sure of the assent of French Authority; we do not think that any serious difficulties will be met, as, for the good of France's colonial future, the bigger the increase of French enterprises, the better.

Jullien told Kerr that if he wished, they were prepared to go to Paris where they had good connections in the Ministries of Colonies and Finance. They would however need full information about all aspects of East Santo Plantations. If they received this without delay

... we shall be able to produce in a short time a complete plan of reorganisation of your business, so as to obtain for your products the *regime de faveur*—the favoured tariff—reserved to French subjects.

The reply came back on 19 March to say that the shareholders of East Santo Plantations were happy to go ahead with the plan. The reply included a list of them and their holdings, all of them family and British except for the Emile My family who held 2000 of the 15,607 shares, valued at one pound each.

Graham Kerr did not want the Julliens to think that it was only pecuniary advantage behind the sudden move to become French. He said: 'Naturally the attitude of the French government to its nationals and the continued inactivity and indifference of British officials during the past 30 years as to the position of British settlers, has considerable bearing on the matter'. He mentioned Captain Macleod, 'our predecessor in the New Hebrides and from whom considerable of the property of the original SFNH came' and quoted an article that appeared in the *Bulletin* of 26 May 1894 that mentioned Macleod's undeviating support of French versus British interests which gained him the enmity of the New Hebrides Mission.²

I am sure that Jullien, who had no personal connection with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, would have been intrigued at what he was told, but Kerr's supporters in France never really understood what an impossibly complicated arrangement had been enshrined between France and England when the Condominium Government was set up and how it affected Kerr, a British subject. In the future—to his French friends' amazement—he would take certain actions which, while they conformed to Condominium law, did not fit French legal practice.

Meantime the Julliens were learning from their own newspapers the actual bankrupt situation of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.³ On 28 December 1934, H. Rohr, who had been sacked from his job in New Hebrides as accountant to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, had written to the Public Prosecutor of the French Republic, Commissioner Nicholle, in Paris, about certain discrepan-

cies he found in annual balance sheets of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* 1929-1934 which he attributed to Charles Aupied.

On 1 April 1935 dealing with the same matter, Rohr again addressed Nicholle telling him that he was sending a copy of the same letter to M. Pierre Taittinger, President of the Colonial Commission in Paris. On 3 April he also wrote to the Governor of New Caledonia and High Commissioner for the Western Pacific.⁴

Leon Vibert was meantime not getting good information from Des Granges, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*'s lawyer in Vila, about real estate owned by the Kerrs in Australia and their financial position which 'is perceptibly diminished at the present time'.

Des Granges also pointed out that what the Kerrs were being indicted for took place eight years earlier, inferring that the Statute of Limitations applied. This meant that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had left it too late. He also explained that here, in New Hebrides, we are faced with one of those very common cases in the New Hebrides where an English company and a French *Société* are considered as being in their own country. (Article XXIII of the Anglo-French Protocol)

If a case was brought against the Kerrs, as the defendants, British law would apply. Des Granges told Vibert that he was of the opinion that it would be better, purely and simply, to abandon this case; nevertheless if your Head Office thinks it ought to pursue the matter, 'I hold myself entirely at your disposal to act in the best of your interests.'⁵

On 4 April Jullien wrote: 'You must always expect, when a big business has its HQ in Paris, to see it contaminated by political graft', as revealed in two articles he enclosed. He hoped that Graham Kerr would agree to their putting their nose into the unsavoury affair.

Jullien cited the example of two big French firms which shared between them the main trade of French West Africa.

One was the *Société Commerciale de l'Ouest Africain* and had its seat in Paris. The other—the *Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale*—had its seat in Marseille. The first went into liquidation and its President, M. Francois Marsel, ex-Minister, was given 6 months prison [possibly Frederic François-Marsal]. The other firm, honestly administered and well managed by 'business men', is—despite the crisis [the Depression]—stronger than ever.

To have his opinions backed by Jullien reassured my father and he told him by letter 30 April that East Santo Plantations board had definitely decided to go ahead with registration in Marseilles as *Société Kerr/My*, [SK/M] 'subject to everything being in order with the French authorities'.

With respect to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* matters, he told Jullien about the letters he wrote to the French Minister for Colonies and the principal shareholders in February 1933, 'pointing out the need for change in the methods of administration. Matters had just drifted. Administration got into the hands of two men: Messieurs Aupied and Raoul-Duval, the latter of the firm of E. Raoul-Duval and Co., Le Havre, who handled the produce from the exploitation.'⁶

Graham Kerr said that 'time and time again' he had told them that administration from Paris was not practical, and when he 'objected to large and useless expenditure there, MM. [*Messageries Maritimes*?], Aupied and Raoul-Duval saw to it that I was not re-nominated as an administrator'.⁷

He could not understand why the shareholders had not intervened. He told Jullien about André Joyer who had been on the Board of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* with him, before it was fused with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in 1930. Joyer had not been re-elected to the Board of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* after the fusion and did not get on with the faction in charge. However Kerr

... hoped he would move for a better state of affairs. To this end I gave him *pouvoir*—Power-of-Attorney—to represent me at the annual meetings. He is very clever and knows the situation thoroughly, but does not succeed in changing things for the better.

He told Jullien that Power of Attorney for Maurice Valette to represent him at *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* meetings was at present being visaed by the French Consul in Sydney and would be forwarded by airmail and that he had written to Joyer telling him what he had done suggesting that a meeting between Joyer and Valette might be helpful. He had also written to his friend Jules Leconte who shared a safe-deposit box with him in Paris until the coming November. Perhaps it would be more convenient for Valette to get one for them in Marseilles?

Graham Kerr did not have much hope for his large holdings of 'dead' shares in the now bankrupt *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

Yet there is no reason why SFNH should not be a prosperous concern, under proper administration. There is a very large production. The French government has a voting power of 1600 shares, but with double voting power. At least that was the situation some two years ago.⁸

On 14 May after months without a letter from André Joyer, Kerr wrote to the Julliens that he had received long confidential information from Joyer and would be very glad for Valette to get in touch with him.⁹ He could be made *au courant* with what was taking place in Paris. 'Complete reorganisation of the administration is necessary for the good of the shareholders and French interests generally.' He enclosed a letter for Valette to give Joyer which told the latter that Valette had his complete confidence. He also told Jullien that the complete Kerr shareholdings in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* were 935 ordinary shares (*au porteur*) of which *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* held 8 on behalf of himself and 8 on behalf of Kerr Bros. Ltd as well as 984 *Parts de Fondateur* (Founder's shares). He himself held one of each kind of share in Sydney.

On 28 May, after hearing that a government enquiry was being held into the management of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, Kerr had written to the Governor of New Caledonia that, being a large shareholder in that company, he felt it his duty in any way possible to bring about a better state of affairs. He also enclosed a copy of the letter he had addressed to the French Minister for Colonies in 1933.¹⁰

The Julliens had meantime gone out of their way to find the best solution to the East Santo Plantations/*Société Kerr/My* problem. Where would be the best place to set up the proposed new company? (1) Marseille. (2) Vila, New Hebrides, or (3) New Caledonia? In a letter dated 17 May, Kerr was told that they were making sure of their advice by consulting 'a high official in the Colonial Administration who is one of our friends'. Their own company solicitor was drawing up a draft of all possibilities for his perusal.

Solution (3) seemed the best to Graham Kerr. On 4 June he told Jullien 'in place of registering at Vila with HQ at Santo, in which there may be some complications with the British authorities, it would obviate any such difficulties by registration and HQ in Noumea, purely French territory'. Also taxation there would perhaps not be as heavy as in France.

It is not easy, perhaps not possible, for a British person in New Hebrides to become French, but with a company it would be somewhat different. Recently a British person ... Wells by name, wished to become French, but the British authorities stepped in to block it. His only method seemed to be residence in New Caledonia (or French territory) for a period.¹¹

Despite this Kerr thought it would

... probably avoid complications for our company to register in Noumea. Some of us would endeavour to obtain French nationalisation which, no doubt, could be done after a period of residence in French territory.

The Julliens had sent him a copy of what was considered to be the history of East Santo Plantations which included some errors.

I remember the subject came up about this time of our family perhaps relocating to Marseilles. Not knowing what was behind it, we were horrified. Sydney was where we wanted to be. Graham Kerr never became French despite his best endeavours.¹²

Regarding current holdings in the New Hebrides 'East Santo Plantations was registered in 1928, not 1899; bought by members of the Kerr family and Emile My in 1927 from T.O. Thomas'. Kerr also told Jullien about the 1927 sale of Turtle Bay to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* later absorbed by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

None or very little of the property sold to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 1927 came from Capt. Macleod, but had been acquired by the Kerr family between 1894 and 1927. Capt. Macleod's properties had already gone to the French before his death in 1894.

The letter ended with the hope that Maurice Valette had made contact with André Joyer. 'M. Aupied may, if he saw a favourable opportunity, spring a hastily summoned General Assembly to approve the 1933 administration'. If Valette were in touch with Joyer he could guard against non-representation of Kerr at any surprise meeting.

To show how fluid the political situation was in Paris at this time Jullien told Kerr on 7 June that high officials were at present discussing the East Santo Plantations business with the Secretary of State.

We hope that these gentlemen will be able to intervene effectively as soon as the political situation permits. (We have just had three Cabinets in the space of a few days).¹³

In fact a General Meeting of shareholders who might protest the decision to have no further plantation development was just what Aupied wanted to avoid. After the showdown following the disastrous balance sheet of July 1934 when debts equalled assets, the agreement between *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and the Government that the *Société* would be a real-estate company only, had been put on hold and it was still in that state.

Joyer was in touch with Valette on 1 June giving him the documentation he had earlier sent to Graham Kerr. The documentation resulted from Joyer's appearance before a Government Committee of Enquiry and I dealt with this in the previous chapter.

Valette was disgusted. He answered Joyer on 7 June:

Perhaps you take things more calmly in Paris, but in the Provinces we have still a certain naïve illusion as regards high officials and the State, and since we have had the facts which we read in the documents which you sent us, we still have the innocence to be indignant for you ... You have already spoken to certain parliamentarians and I am going to see about approaching them here [in Marseilles] so that discussion will not be in the dark. It is rightly unheard of that the State, which possesses the majority of shares, and thus renders difficult the rapid action of other shareholders, has allowed things to go how they please.

Valette told Joyer he would try and help him with a plan to foil Aupied. 'It always disgusts us when we discover this kind of administrator.'

The *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* affair was much more important than Parliament was trying to make out. Valette had read the balance sheets for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which Joyer had enclosed. 'The Raoul-Duval firm makes so little that we wonder whether the total value of the crops will be sufficient to cover the expenses of administration! How stupid and wrong.'

He then instanced the huge amount of copra and peanuts the Jullien firm dealt with annually.

Our office expenses are far, very far, from reaching half the expenses of Paris for the SFNH and with far greater tonnages handled by us too.

It is useless for the State [as major shareholder] to fritter our money away [by giving *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* a subsidy], if complete change of administration is not made a condition.

He had told Joyer that Marseilles was a great market for copra from New Hebrides and that Julliens had various schemes in mind which they would tell him about when worked out.

I think *Société Kerr/My* was part of those schemes because, on 26 June, Jullien told Kerr that

In the event of your scheme being crowned with success... it would be very agreeable to us to own a few shares in your company ... We say ... that it is the confidence we have in your firm and you personally which prompts us to make this proposition, because we do not easily lend our name.

A further letter was written to Kerr by Jullien on 11 July telling him that the situation that the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* Board had allowed impeded its commercial activity.

They were in close communication with André Joyer who told them that several members of Parliament were aware of what was going on. If the current scandal had not arisen it would have been necessary for many people to be questioned about it. No one will want to do business with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* as a result. He here hinted at the proposed setting up of *Société Kerr/My* and perhaps the extension of its business.¹⁴

We remain in contact with influential friends who have promised us their support.

Graham Kerr provided all the information required for the proposed *Société Kerr/My* and also told the Julliens on 23 July that 29 tons of smoke-dried copra was going forward to them by *Laperouse*, brand-marked 'My'. This meant that the My family's lease of East Santo Plantations must have been accepted by French authority in New Hebrides and the copra would be due for *detaxe*.

Strange things seemed to be going on in Paris regarding *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which did not appear to be leading to the downfall of Aupied or the proposed real-estate scheme agreed on in 1934 and, after the enquiry by the state, held in abeyance.

On 20 August Kerr 'learned from Mr Ancelin [then in Sydney]—a former employee of SFNH—that he had had a letter from a friend of his in France asking his opinion about some of the properties of SFNH, particularly the plantations Kerr and Petersen, with a view to taking a lease of some part of [them]'. He understood from Ancelin

... that it is proposed to lease the plantations ... for periods of 5, 10 or 15 years; 1/3rd of the production to go in payment of rent and 2/3rds to remain for the expenses of exploitation and the benefit of the renter. There are some good properties, particularly the Kerr and Petersen plantations ... and the plantations at Surunda, all on Santo.

Malo plantations are not so good, and those at Téouma, Efate, are not worth the exploitation. Labour is the trouble at present. There are not many Tonkinese left in the New Hebrides now, and it is not easy to procure sufficient native labour. Apparently the French planters found Tonkinese labour more expensive than the local.

Julliens in Marseilles were hearing rumours too. On 22 August Kerr received a letter from them about his 918 ordinary shares [*au porteur*]. Julliens arranged to buy them @ 32 francs per share on the understanding that Graham Kerr would buy them back after a year. It seemed that the French Government had reinstated the agreement with the Board of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* made in 1934, turning it into a real-estate company only.

This depended on acceptance or rejection by the shareholders in a time limit of four months. A bad blow to the shareholders as cessation of plantation exploitation would make the already heavily devalued shares practically worthless and make it imperative that as many shareholders oppose the agree-

ment as possible—Kerr included. Aupied was now insisting that all shares be ‘in the nominative’, so that when Kerr’s name came up amongst shareholders submitting shares to attend the General Meeting of shareholders, he could institute delay tactics. With the shares under the name of Valette, he would have to prove their actual ownership.¹⁵

On 20 September Th. Jullien told Kerr that an extraordinary meeting had been convened for 4 October. André Joyer had told him that he was sure they would not get a quorum and hence the Julliens would not appear in person in Paris. Instead Joyer was to represent the Julliens at any meeting that might take place.

The position with this poor company—SFNH—is that it would like to hire out its property and plantations! It is truly absurd and the situation must be desperate for them to do that.

Jullien also told Kerr that a Magistrate had been called to examine the balance sheet for 1932 which M. Aupied would not like and that Joyer had again been called to give evidence. ‘You will understand’, wrote Jullien, ‘that this will not encourage the Board of SFNH to call together their shareholders! What a dirty story and how regrettable it is to see fine businesses made a mess of by thieves!’

The meeting did not take place and from a letter from the Julliens to Graham Kerr dated 29 October: ‘Our Mr Valette has left to try and be present at the General Assembly of SFNH; unfortunately we fear that he will arrive too late, the date having been suddenly put forward; there is however, a chance that this Assembly may not be held for want of a quorum’. Valette would be seeing Mr Joyer. They had heard from the Joyer that *Société Kerr/My* was in process of being set up in Noumea:

We think that you will have received from the Governor of New Caledonia the welcome promised you. Mr Valette should also be seeing the Colonial Minister during his visit to Paris.¹⁶

Thanking the Julliens for their great assistance Graham Kerr replied on 19 November that using the material they had forwarded, the new company—*Société Kerr/My*—was in process of being registered in Noumea. Louis Catalan of *Catalan Frères*, Wine Merchants of Noumea and Montpellier France, had become a shareholder. Graham Kerr had gone to Noumea to get things moving and then returned to Sydney while the necessary procedures went forward. While in Noumea he applied for French citizenship.¹⁷

It was expected that the first shipment from *Société Kerr/My* to Julliens would be made by *Laperouse* due at Hog Harbour 30 December. So pleased were the Kerr family about the assistance given that they wanted Julliens to be on the Board of *Société Kerr/My* as its French representative at a lower rate for the shares they would take out. Several French planters who were clients of Kerr Bros. Ltd in Sydney now opted to use the Julliens as their French agent. These included Noel, Houchard and Ratard.¹⁸ However some of the produce sent forward on their behalf was not up to standard.

For years prior to heavier rates of duty here [Sydney] we received regular and well-prepared produce for the two last named [Houchard and Ratard] which sold very well in Australian and New Zealand markets. Then Kerr Bros. received produce from them tainted with something like creosote which had to be destroyed. It seemed that *Maison Barrau* had recommended some new treatment in the fermenting process which did not do the job. Noel had forwarded copra to Julliens through Kerr Bros. that was much underweight, not from dishonesty, but because he was financially strapped.

On 11 December Kerr told Julliens that he was going to Santo, where he would try to organise a standard grade in cacao, coffee and copra with the planters there who shipped to Julliens through *Société Kerr/My*. ‘Unless some organised effort is made, New Hebrides produce will remain of a low grade ... I shall see Houchard, Ratard and other important planters re preparation and shipment’.

The Julliens ended the year on 24 December by accepting a position on the Board of *Société Kerr/My*:

We have entire confidence in all you undertake, and we ask you, on our side, to count on our vigilant attention and all our energy in defence of your interests.

Certain correspondence between André Joyer and Maurice Valette throws more light on the precarious situation of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* at this time. Here two Frenchmen were able to talk knowledgeably to one another.

Valette, not himself financially involved but as Kerr's proxy, was following things closely after the French State as the major shareholder in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* decided in June to go ahead with the 1934 decision to close down all plantation activity of the company.

On 29 July Valette asked Joyer for his opinion. He himself thought there was no hope for the shareholders to get any return from the company as the State would be paid first if the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* happens to sell its property in a satisfactory way. Even that was very doubtful. He thought that the very existence of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was the only hope for shareholders. If they were forbidden to exploit their plantations it was certain that there would be no profit or gradual improvement of the situation. Valette thought:

The SFNH will soon be no more than a refuge for high officials who are anxious to make their retirement as good as possible.

Back in June 1935, after absorbing the information Joyer had given him about the activities of Charles Aupied, Valette with Joyer's approval wrote to Graham Kerr suggesting that Kerr write to M. Nicholle *Commissaire aux Delegations Judiciaires* in Paris. Valette told Kerr what he should say and asked that it be sent to him. He said he 'would ask Mr Ed. Jullien, his uncle, as well as being a Judge of the Marseilles Tribunal of Commerce, to deliver it personally to M. Nicholle'.

This Graham Kerr did on 2 July, telling Nicholle of the note he had given Raoul-Duval in person on 18 November 1932 warning him of the very serious financial position of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which reflected no credit to the Board. He told Nicholle that he had been protesting for months to no avail. All activities of the Board were controlled by Charles Aupied who thought to distract attention from his disastrous administration of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* by bringing up a dispute about the tree count on plantations sold by Kerr Bros. to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 1927—where the estimates of various representatives of the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* were themselves in conflict. M. Nicholle could question André Joyer about this matter as he with Aupied had been Deputy Administrator of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* until it was merged with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in 1930.

The setting up of East Santo Plantations as a French company, *Société Kerr/My*, in Noumea gave Joyer and the Julliens, through Valette, the idea that Graham Kerr might be able to retrieve *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides's* commercial fortunes on behalf of the shareholders if enough of them could be present at a General Assembly to object to the new arrangement.

A letter from Valette dated 20 November told Kerr that the meeting convened for 4 November was suddenly called on 29 October, before Valette could reach Paris to represent him. This was not critical as a quorum was not achieved.

After talking with Joyer, Valette concluded that, if the agreement between *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and the State was not ratified, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would draw up its Balance sheet and, given the state of its treasury, a liquidator would sell everything for almost nothing. The only hope of rescuing the *Société* lay with Joyer and Kerr.

There must be a meeting of shareholders at which Kerr was represented. The plan Valette and his influential friends had drawn up and which he now spelled out to Joyer would put Joyer back on a completely new Board of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and Mr Kerr would get the job of looking after *Société* interests in the New Hebrides and arranging markets for its products.

We cannot allow continued dealings with a firm at Le Havre [Raoul-Duval], whose operations are scandalously expensive ... We cannot permit an important shareholder whose honesty, integrity and experience cannot be contested, to have his intervention set aside.

Another condition was that the quibble about the contradictory tree count which Aupied was using against Kerr must be dropped. Kerr for his part was to try and get shareholders in Noumea to give him authority, as well as other important shareholders in France, to agree to Valette's plan. Valette wrote

It would be necessary for him [Kerr] to be in Noumea and in touch with the Government there in such a way that, if, on our demand, the Minister for Colonies questions the Governor on the subject of the administration of the SFNH there, we can exert influence and present your opinion.

Things were still very uncertain

... but you can be assured, dear Sir, that I shall not lose sight of things and that we shall undertake everything which will defend your interests.

In a letter dated 10 October Valette told Kerr that the proposed general assembly of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to ratify the convention between the company and the State called for 4 October had not succeeded for lack of a quorum. Aupied was being questioned by a committee of Enquiry at which he denied everything.

Valette had been particularly disgusted at the brazen appointment of the father-in-law of Aupied's daughter, M. Germain, as Chief Accountant of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which was perhaps not illegal but against the spirit of the law of such appointments; that they be strictly independent. To Valette, it 'would have been necessary for Justice to have intervened at the end of 1932'. That was the time when Kerr was voted off the Board by Aupied to stop his revelations.

In a letter to Valette from Sydney on 19 November Kerr wrote: 'Whether anything can be done to safeguard the shareholder's interest, I do not know. The leasing of the plantations will do no good'. During his recent visit to Noumea he 'saw the Governor of New Caledonia and found out that he is perfectly aware of the proclivities of the Aupied gang. I told him that I would be willing to reorganise the exploitation and sale of products. He said he would be very glad to have a project from me' and Kerr gave the Governor a brief outline of his projects before returning to Sydney.

On 20 December he received a letter from the Julliens which, while not conclusive, at least showed the things were developing. A general assembly took place on 22 November at which Joyer put questions to the *Conseil*. Aupied denied everything and M. Germain would not reply to questions raised earlier in the year, but he at least did not ask for his job to be renewed. Jullien thought that 'it was very certain that this gentleman was a little anxious'. Joyer had told Kerr that questions were still being asked on the Floor of the House and that he himself had lodged complaints at three meetings. At least a new Board of Administration for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was being set up.

Regarding the cordial meetings Kerr had with the Governor of New Caledonia, Jullien remarked that they 'were extremely important, I think that the steps we have taken in Paris should help you and that they have caused the Governor to receive you in a favourable and friendly fashion'. He wanted confirmation from Graham Kerr so that he could thank the person in Paris who had brought it about.

He wanted the Governor to be given explicit plans for what Kerr proposed to do with *Société Kerr/My* and to get *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on its feet again so the Governor would be ready if questioned by the French Government. Noumea was proposed as the headquarters of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* with a small office in Paris purely for the centralisation of correspondence, the depositing of accounts and legal formalities. It would have an administrator, an accountant and a typist. New Hebrides was where the produce came from and, once it was on its way, even with the aid of advances of money, profit could be made in the same way as Julliens and Kerr Bros. Ltd. already did it.

Jullien drew attention to the enormous expenses Raoul-Duval incurred by such advances and which Aupied did not query. Jullien thought that although Aupied was an astute financier, he knew nothing about commerce. *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* should be an agricultural company selling its products at the least possible expense. Jullien was sure the Governor of New Caledonia would be surprised if he knew the few expenses your clients incurred when they sold through Kerr Bros. He had heard that certain shipments managed by the Paris office and by Raoul-Duval amounted to 30% of the gross profit.

Examining the balance sheet of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, Jullien found that general expenses were 1,050,000 francs, while the work that brought in the money, the produce, cost 950,000 francs which was not only stupid but scandalous.

By the end of 1935 Graham Kerr knew he had influential people working to help him in France even if the outcome was uncertain.

None of what I have said so far is spelled out in my father's diaries. He mentioned Julliens of Marseilles, Kerr family Board meetings of East Santo Plantations with respect to making it a French company, and two visits in the second half of the year to Noumea in connection with *Société Kerr/My's* inauguration. D.H. Kerr was at Hog Harbour for most of the year while his brother dealt with the business in Sydney.

In order to obtain further custom for Kerr Brothers, George Millar from the Sydney office was sent to New Guinea and, later in the year, the firm was granted agencies for New Guinea, New Caledonia and New Hebrides by the Sydney firm of Scott and Sons. Graham Kerr looked for new equipment for the plantation at Hog Harbour such as tractors and flame throwers to try and destroy the blue flower that was laying large areas to waste.

At the same time Kerr Bros went out of its way to look after its French clientele. A cutter for M. Cassin of Santo was built at Morrison & Sinclair's shipyard at Long Nose Point, Birchgrove. This was loaded onto the deck of *Laperouse* on 27 August for delivery to its owner.¹⁹ Georges Dedieu, an associate of the Ratard family of Santo, was another customer for a boat while Gaston de Sonnevillle wanted a pre-cut house. They along with Louis Peyrolle were staying with the Daly family from Noumea at Five Dock in Sydney.

These people were not treated merely as clients but invited to our home and for family picnics. Amongst those so entertained were M. and Mme. Déchery on their way back to France—his employment by Vibert and *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* now terminated—also M. Ancelin, who gave him the news that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* plantations were being considered for sale or lease probably to fulfil the *Société's* new policy.

Later in the year Louis Fricotte, boat builder of Vila, came up to Sydney for hospital treatment and was taken by Graham Kerr to see Dr Poate and visited just as he had earlier looked after Fernand Largeau. In fact it was not Frenchmen in New Hebrides who wished Kerr ill but a certain Frenchman in distant Paris.

The family also kept up warm relations with British friends in the New Hebrides, including the Seago family, who were visiting Sydney to see their son Geoffrey stroke the 'Shore' eight to victory at the Head of the River race for 1935. My only brother, Len, was also a pupil at 'Shore' but much younger. E.G. Seago, nephew of Captain Rason, first British Resident Commissioner, was part of the British side of the Condominium government and a family friend from the beginning of the century.

Closer relationships were that with J.M. Nicol, Condominium District Officer on Tanna who was married to Graham Kerr's younger sister Flora, and with the Lockhart Bell family. Thelma Bell, third



Photo 61: Joyce Kerr aged about 22 years at a picnic. Photo taken by her mother Muriel. The 1935 photos of family members in this chapter were found in 2018 amongst Katherine's papers as negatives from the same roll of film.



Photo 62: Joyce Kerr aged about 22 and taken by her mother, Muriel Kerr, at Kermadec. Her hair is very fashionable and probably done by Muriel.



Photo 63: Katherine Kerr aged 17 to 18 years.

daughter of William Lockhart Bell and known to my family since babyhood, was married to Philip Keegan also employed by the British part of the Condominium and many visits were exchanged between the Bell family in Sydney and mine.

In remarking on these relationships, I am attempting to put my father's proposed change of nationality in perspective. British subjects, unless employed by the Government, found their paths fraught with difficulty trying to make a living in the New Hebrides. Taking on French citizenship, or at least attempting to, was not a traitorous act to one's own nation but a necessity under the strange circumstances prevailing in the New Hebrides.

Graham Kerr paid two visits to the Islands in rapid succession at the end of the year. The first was on 16 October when he left for Noumea. Among the passengers were Tiby Hagen, M. and Mme. Michel Pascal, G. de Sonnevile, Mlle. Daly and 'young Peyrolle', all of these 'friends' except Hagen, who was always regarded by Kerr with suspicion because of his connection with Raoul-Duval and Aupied. Michel Pascal was to deliver a letter to Hog Harbour when the ship reached Santo.

The legal niceties of setting up *Société Kerr/My* now took place. Jean My had sent Kerr authority to represent the My family at its inauguration. Kerr's lawyer was Marcel Coursin with whom he went to interview the Notary M. Ducasse then he visited Catalan, shareholder in the new company. On 6 November with Catalan and Coursin

... we saw the governor by Appointment. He seems to be a nice man—I met him at Santo last year—spoke of the new *Société* and the affairs of SFNH. During the day Coursin and I called on the Chief Inspector for the Colonies, now here and we spoke of SFNH affairs. Aupied's bad reputation is well known. Called at Ducasse's and signed the *Statuts* for *Société Kerr/My*, also procuration for the *Assemblée Constitutive*.

After finishing this business he could now return to Sydney where he was at once caught up in his usual round of business and family pursuits. None of this left even a minute just to sit quietly. We, his children, never experienced peace when he was home and now there was talk of selling our much-loved home and living in Noumea.

By the beginning of December, at a meeting of the Board of East Santo Plantations, it was decided he had better return to Noumea as soon as the firm of Kerr Brothers Ltd. had settled into its new office in the Assembly Hall at the corner of Jamison and York Streets. He believed it was necessary for him to be in Noumea to attend to the change-over and the smooth-running of the new company.

By the 18 December Frank Reynolds was back from Hog Harbour in the *Morinda* leaving Coates in charge. A visit to the plantation was necessary. Graham Kerr was back in Noumea by 24 December where he signed various papers regarding the constitution of *Société Kerr/My* with Ducasse before boarding *Laperouse* once again for the trip to the New Hebrides, visiting Lifou on the way.

At Vila he had time to visit Des Granges about Kerr land claims, still not settled, before leaving for Santo. Surunda was first port of call then Hog Harbour which had recently been rather badly hit by a hurricane which caused trouble loading the 50 tons of copra that awaited their arrival.

The entry for last day of the 1935 in my father's diary sounded rather miserable. Everything looked very slipshod following the hurricane. To show that Hog Harbour was now run by a French company, *Société Kerr/My*, he ran up the French flag. He then visited William Anderson at the New Hebrides Mission station nearby and later had a visit from Harbulot of Port Olry.

He did not stay up to see the New Year in but wondered what kind of party his family were having in Sydney to welcome it. Sadly I think that we, his mostly teen-age children, were probably taking advantage of his absence to enjoy it in our own way, just like our young Australian fellows who had none of the complications that our difficult New Hebridean connection put in our way.



Photo 64: Margaret Kerr aged about 15 to 16 years—taken at Kermadec.

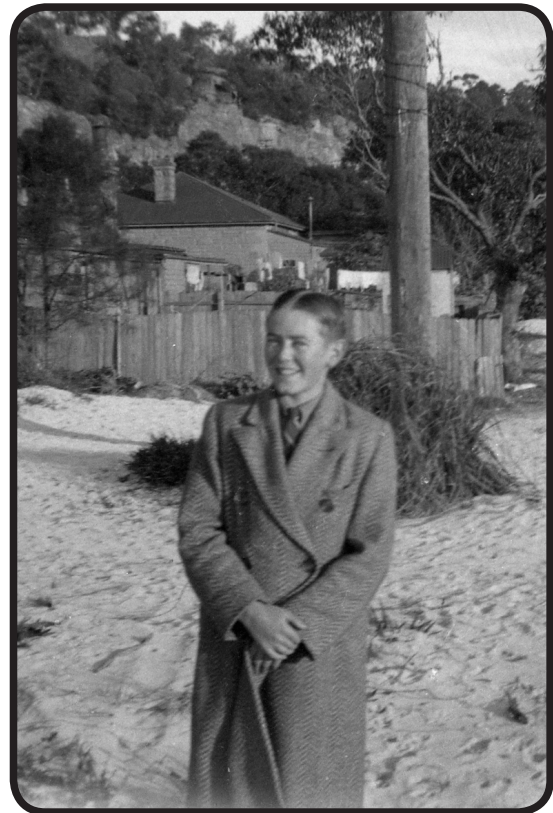


Photo 65: Len Kerr at a beach but dressed formally aged about 13 years.

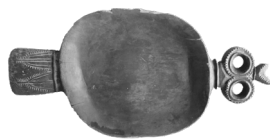
Endnotes

- 1 Th. Jullien to G. Kerr 4 Jan 1935. For this and other letters between Jullien and Kerr quoted in this chapter see Orange Clipped Folder no. 2. For corres. between the Julliens, Valette and Joyer see Orange Clipped Folder No. 1.
- 2 In fact my father had no real idea of the fight Macleod had with the SFNH to maintain his independence. In order to be able to remain in the Group Macleod had worked for them but refused to change his British nationality. My father had no experience of working for his uncle in the New Hebrides, only arriving there aged 21 in 1894, after Macleod's death. Most of Macleod's papers were destroyed in the 1920s by a young NZ relative who did not realise their historical value. Official records both British and French were impossible to come by in my father's lifetime and it was only in the 1980s when researching for my book on Captain Macleod that I laboriously unearthed them from here, there and everywhere. If my father had realised the real situation, he might have been wary of having dealings with a company, which was plagued by shady money problems from its inception. It was actually set up in 1882 as CCNH, to get around the Agreement of 1878 which guaranteed that neither France nor England could annex the New Hebrides. If the French company, which was effectively the French government, could gain preponderance the Agreement could be thus set at naught. Macleod too had thought that the CCNH was a private concern. In fact I have never seen it stated in so many words that SFNH was the French Government but the power it wielded in the New Hebrides could have come from no other source.
- 3 For an article entitled 'SFNH; No more money without guarantee of good administration' from *L'Action Française* 4 April 1935 see White Envelope No. 3.
- 4 See White Envelope No.1, Documentation of the corrupt practices of Charles Aupied.
- 5 See Folder 10. Xerox obtained by me from the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris in 1983. *Affaire Kerr*, dated 19 April 1935.
- 6 This was done in conjunction with the Hagen firm in the New Hebrides—*Etablissements Hagen* of Epi. Tiby Hagen had a meeting with Charles Aupied to cement the deal. Hagen would collect the produce of the plantations, CGFH, CAMNH and CCV and arrange for delivery to his French agent Raoul-Duval.
- 7 On 2 July my father sent the Judicial Commissioner in Paris, M. Nicholle the note written in English to the *Conseil* SFNH. It was translated completely differently by Raoul-Duval, which brought about my father's removal from the Board of SFNH on 1 Nov 1932. This note formed part of the evidence he gave his lawyer *Maitre* Bourdinat in the case against him in Noumea in 1944. My father kept every document that proved his innocence.
- 8 Is this where the Julliens received the idea that, despite the fact SFNH was bankrupt, the situation could be turned around with the help of my father?
- 9 For this long report on the doings of SFNH plus translation (dated in pencil March 1935) see White Envelope No. 3. Documentation of the corrupt actions of Charles Aupied.
- 10 See White Envelope No. 3. Documentation of the corrupt actions of Charles Aupied.
- 11 This was probably Mathew George Wells who owned a plantation on Malo called Sanawoa. Mat Well's half-Indigenous son, John, took out French nationality and after Mat Wells retired to Norfolk Island for reasons of health, John ran Sanawoa. See *Hébridais* p. 234. When the Condominium was set up British subjects were to be judged under British law and French ones under French law. All foreigners in the Group were allowed to choose which law they would follow.
- 12 When my sister Muriel and I were trying to make sense out of his many papers in the 1980s, long after his death in Noumea in 1960, we could not understand why he would want to take the nationality of a country which had done him so much harm. It took us much more rummaging to realise that by so doing he was acting on a plea from French shareholders in Paris led by Joyer and set up by Valette with the backing of influential friends, to help save SFNH. This would require my father taking over its management in Noumea for a short time, to put it on a proper footing. By so doing he would also be trying to rescue the Kerr family's large holdings.
- 13 This did not necessarily mean that completely different people were now in power. It was just that each Cabinet was comprised of the same people in different political groupings.
- 14 Here I think is the germ of the scheme later put to my father which he would take up in a letter to the Minister for Colonies. This would of course make it even more imperative for Aupied, the French Government mouth-piece, to discredit him so that the real-estate scheme could go ahead.
- 15 See Orange Clipped Folder No. 2 Jullien Letter File. Later Valette bought 20 of Kerr Bros shares so that he could submit them quickly in his own name if a meeting was suddenly called. This lucky event, after a law suit brought by SFNH and lost, eventually saved the *au porteur* shares—for what they were worth—for the Kerrs.
- 16 For the many letters which passed between my father and the Julliens and their envoy Maurice Valette in 1935 see Orange Clipped Folder No. 2 Jullien Corres. and Black Envelope no. 3. Valette Corres. True to their word the Julliens and their solicitor and friends in Paris had found all the things my father needed to know to set up a French company and had even arranged for the Governor of New Caledonia to be told about it. The influential person who intervened in Paris told Valette that a private letter had been sent to the Governor requesting his help.
- 17 French citizenship was never granted. For what reason, I do not know. Perhaps he was opposed by the British part of the Condominium Government, which might have feared a stampede to become French on the part of other

beleaguered British subjects in the New Hebrides?

18 Houchard would eventually insist on using Raoul-Duval in Le Havre for his copra.

19 The cutter was originally to be built at Holmes' boat-yard at McMahons Point but after much vacillation my father cancelled the deal with him on 29 May. His diary entry for 12 June 1935 ran: 'Holmes, the boat builder ... was murdered last night—he seems to have been mixed up in the extraordinary 'human arm' from a shark case, and was to have given evidence to-day. We were lucky to have got Cassin's order for a craft cancelled—papers full of Holmes' murder and the trial of Brady for the murder of Smith'—whose arm it was.



Chapter 18 1936: The Situation of the *Société* in Paris is in not Getting Better for Shareholders

On 1 January 1936 the *Bulletin du Commerce*, Noumea, published the inauguration of *Société Kerr/My*. Graham Kerr told Jullien on 4 February that

All French officials I came in contact with were very agreeable, including the governor of New Caledonia, the French resident Commissioner in the New Hebrides (Monsieur Casimir) and the *Délégué* at Santo (M. Lainé).¹

Indigenous labour was becoming increasing difficult to come by and they had asked for 12 Tonkinese to be provided from Saigon by *Laperouse* on her March trip. He hoped 'to have all in good running order as a French *Société* by the end of March ... all French regulations adhered to'. By then he also hoped to have a complete list of shareholding and a copy of the *Statuts*. The old company, East Santo Plantations did not finish its financial year until 30 June. 'From that date we shall carry on our accounting in francs'.²

He hoped to be able to develop a trade in French goods between Kerr Bros. Ltd in Sydney through the Julliens, telling them that by the end of 1936 it was believed there would be air service connecting Europe and Australia taking only seven days. 'That will bring us very close.'

However things were not improving in Paris. Valette on 3 January 1936 sent Graham Kerr a copy of the Convention voted for by the French parliament and agreed to by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and containing a postscript about all *au porteur* shares having to be put in the nominative as approved by Parliament on 22 November 1935.³ Kerr did not receive it until 10 February when he returned from New Hebrides.

Valette and the Julliens had the same opinion of Joyer as Graham Kerr as to his integrity, but they wondered why he had not been able to get things moving after his revelations to the Committee of Enquiry set up by the State. They wanted to know the chances of any of the plantation properties being leased out by local planters. They now had no high hopes and wanted to return the Kerr shares to Graham Kerr under the same conditions in which they were offered when taken over on 17 September 1935. This was discussed in my last chapter.⁴ Kerr immediately agreed. On 30 October 1935 Valette bought 20 shares, which would permit him to take part in meetings and represent my father if necessary. With the permission of the other family shareholders, the remaining 898 shares were to go under my father's name to simplify matters.

While things were being worked out, the shares would go to Marseilles to *Comptoir National d'Escompte* whose Sydney branch would be getting in touch with him to sign a Power of Attorney so that Valette could open the Safety Deposit Box in Marseilles if necessary.⁵

On 9 April Valette told him that, as agreed, he had asked *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* through *Comptoir National d'Escompte* to put the remaining shares under Graham Kerr's name.⁶ *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* replied that for title under that name to be granted it was necessary that Mr Kerr proved that he was their owner before 22 November 1935. This was difficult to prove as some of the shares were held in trust for others:

It seems that the *Conseil SFNH*, which will stop at nothing to make difficulties for you, wants to complicate matters by refusing to transfer all the shares under your name.

Valette thought that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was exceeding its rights by refusing to grant ownership to Kerr and that it was done because of the deep hatred they felt for him. To counter this he thought they could approach the Governor of New Caledonia about *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*'s attitude and get the Ministry for Colonies to intervene if necessary.

While in the New Hebrides Graham Kerr, thankful for the Julliens' support, had tried to rally as many French planters as possible to use the Marseilles firm as their agent rather than Raoul-Duval, but met considerable prejudice. He told Jullien 'you know my opinion of Raoul-Duval. Is there any way we can get round this prejudice?' He asked did Julliens have a reliable representative in Le Havre. He would certainly not consign any produce from *Société Kerr/My* to Raoul-Duval. From a business point of view Kerr thought that

... with present prices of produce, the main properties could pay their way handsomely ... with practical management and honest handling of exploitation, sale of produce and purchase of supplies.

Since receiving the terms of the convention signed between *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and the State, he thought that the brief plan he had given the Governor of New Caledonia 'for the practical working of the main properties in the New Hebrides' was now useless.

It may be that these people [Aupied, Raoul-Duval and Vibert] who have run the *Société* into the recent deplorable state may now endeavour to obtain control of the properties for their own ends. Can we guard against this? Where do the shareholders' interests come in?

Valette agreed that French produce from the New Hebrides could no longer go to such a scandalously expensive market as Raoul-Duval at Le Havre. This was not a suitable place for it anyway. Thus it is easy to see that by now that Aupied and Raoul-Duval would be putting their best efforts into destroying the good name of the man set up as a potential saviour of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*—an important shareholder whose honesty, integrity and experience could not be contested. How better than by bringing up the 'tree-count'. They would have been hard-pressed to find anything else as Kerr Brothers was noted in the New Hebrides for its honesty which was attested to by clients of all nationalities.

Back in Noumea the problem of a resident manager for Hog Harbour plantation came up. Louis Catalan, President of *Société Kerr/My*, whose office in Noumea was the headquarters of the new company had the matter in hand.⁷ The widowed Mme. My was my father's choice and her son Jean thought if she had been in charge earlier things would have gone well but that now it was too late. It was decided it must be a married Frenchman. There had been enough trouble with employing single young men.⁸

That was not the only trouble the new company had at its inception. There was talk of a very severe hurricane affecting My's plantation at Sara near Shark Bay and Hog Harbour early in 1936. Catalan was worried that from the very beginning *Société Kerr/My* would have losses to register. There were also problems of registration-fees for the new company which Ducasse had estimated at 22,000 francs but which turned out to be 60,000—a big difference and as expensive as if the company had been registered in Marseilles.

Graham Kerr answered Catalan's letter from Sydney on 5 March. He had heard nothing of the hurricane except what appeared in the Noumea newspaper. He explained that there were no radio stations near Hog Harbour. 'It is many years, if ever, that Hog Harbour had any considerable damage by cyclone.'

He was wrong, for when *Van Rees* arrived in Sydney he learned that:

In common with other plantations on Santo, we suffered considerable damage by the blow at the end of January. It is difficult to estimate the damage, but it will mean a con-

siderably reduced output later on, so many green nuts have been blown down. We shall have to tighten up our expenses.

Kerr told Catalan he was leaving Sydney on *Laperouse* on 6 April and would see him in Noumea.

There were now three people up for consideration as plantation manager: Hermann Ohlen, H.J. Chantreux, and Jules Jocteur. All of them were suitable and Chantreux highly recommended by both the Governor of New Caledonia and M. H-L Milliard, Manager of Ballandes favoured by Catalan. Graham Kerr eventually installed Jocteur and his wife whom he knew personally.

Meanwhile in Paris, Kerr's bid to set the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on its feet as a producer of agricultural products was again being considered. This had strong support from some *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shareholders and members of the French Cabinet resulting from André Joyer's revelations and was aided by the 'powerful friend' of the Julliens in Paris.

It now became imperative to Aupied with his strong Parliamentary support to prove that Graham Kerr was not trustworthy. Although Kerr did not yet know it, Aupied had been working since 1933 with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* lawyers in Paris to bring an action against the Kerr firm and Kerr personally.⁹ If they could not use the price paid in 1927 by *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, in the action, perhaps action could be exacted by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on the price of the hand-over of the moveable property?¹⁰ The Director General of Registration *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was asked his opinion as far back as 6 May 1933.

On 19, April 1935, Vibert told Aupied what G. Des Granges, the lawyer in Vila had found out.¹¹ Des Granges was from the beginning ambivalent, pointing out that bringing a case regarding the number of trees in a sale made eight years earlier was perhaps doubtful.¹²

Des Granges had been shown the document signed by Audoin for *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and Kerr on 28 August 1928 which represented the money owed from the sale of removables. This, he said, had not mentioned trees. Also the act of sale 9 February 1927 gave tree figures but preceded them by the word 'about'. He told Vibert that in the New Hebrides the defendant in a real estate case between French and British subjects under Condominium law would be tried under the law of his own country—in the case of Graham Kerr—British. Aupied in Paris was trying to make out that as the sale had been signed in Paris, French law prevailed, not Condominium law. Des Granges said that this would be challenged.

Summing up, Des Granges was 'of the opinion it would be better purely and simply to abandon this case but if your HQ thinks it ought to pursue the matter, I hold myself entirely at your disposal to act to the best of your interests'. While he was not helpful to Vibert neither was he to Kerr.

By the end of January 1936 Vibert was fed up with Des Granges. Des Granges had apparently sent a telegram to Aupied asking for an advance of 50,000 francs to take on the case against Kerr. 'Our adviser' wrote Vibert to Aupied, 'has completely lost his head ... it is no longer possible to count on him for anything important'. And perhaps they would not be able to count on any other of their supporters in Vila either. Vibert was thoroughly disliked and distrusted by his French fellows in the New Hebrides. He was due to go to Paris to consult with Aupied and it was essential for a reliable person to represent him in Vila in his absence.

On 10 February he again registered great dissatisfaction and anger at Des Granges' dilatoriness in bringing the case. Des Granges excused himself by saying that the French Court was not qualified to hear it. By the laws of the Agreement of 1906 and the Protocol of 1914 it could only be heard before the Joint Court. He still wanted his fees, said Vibert.

M. Des Granges has too many clients and does not wish to displease any of them, in consequence he does nothing but pocket the fees. At this moment he is occupied in establishing Kerr in SFNH. It has been said that the last mentioned person has asked for and will obtain naturalization.¹³

For obvious reasons it was most important that the first step be taken in the French Court while the Joint Court was in recess as happened in January and February of each year. The British Judge was conveniently absent. On 10 February 1936, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* with Des Granges

as its lawyer was cited in the formal pronouncement as the plaintiff, and Kerr Bros. Ltd of Sydney and G.L.S. Kerr, conjointly, were the defendants.¹⁴ Tree figures on the two plantations were given as 48,894 on Turtle Bay plantation instead of 51,000, with 21,407 on Julius Petersen's plantation of Mate Wulu, despite the fact that in the original deed of sale Mate Wulu's were not guaranteed and those on Turtle Bay were prefixed with the word 'about'. On 26 February it was formally announced in the French court by the French Judge, G. Jeanson, that the defendants who were domiciled in Australia would be summoned to present themselves at the court on 9 July 1936 to answer charges.

Nothing was neglected by Vibert to find out exactly what the Kerrs owned, and 27 May 1936 Des Granges informed him that Hog Harbour Plantation was not owned personally by the Kerrs but was the property of *Société Kerr/My* so they could not put in a claim for it. But, perhaps they could claim for the salary paid to Graham Kerr as Deputy Manager as well as the shares he would have to deposit with it. Marcel Coursin in Noumea was the lawyer who set up *Société Kerr/My*. Vibert, who still had doubts about Des Granges, had thought him to be responsible. Probably Des Granges for his own reasons was now putting himself in Vibert's good books at the same time as having dealings with Kerr.

M. Catalan, President of the board of *Société Kerr/My*, contacted Kerr on 8 June telling him that he had received a letter from the Governor of New Caledonia that things had not been put right with British Authority in Vila when East Santo Plantations became *Société Kerr/My*. The reply from Graham Kerr came back on 17 June that

I informed the British Commissioner verbally, and he has been notified officially through M. Des Granges, who is attending to legal matters in Vila for us.

During May, in the presence of the British District Agent, I paid all native labour remaining that had been under British registration, and handed the Register to the District Agent. The British Commissioner had informed me that he would not insist on these natives being sent home, but that he left them free to continue under the French regime to finish their time. A list of these natives had already been supplied to the French *Délégué* ... as a notification only, not for registration ... Really the only concern that the British authorities could have in the matter is the payment and repatriation of the native labour who were under registration by ESP.

By 21 July 1936 in Sydney, the Kerr shareholders of East Santo Plantations held their last meeting and it was legally in liquidation. Was somebody trying to give Graham Kerr a bad name with the Governor of New Caledonia and with the President of *Société Kerr/My* too?

On 19 March the Consul-General for France in Sydney sent him the following letter:

The Attorney General of the court in Noumea, New Caledonia, has asked me to forward to you the enclosed summons from the court of Vila, New Hebrides. I would be grateful if you would forward a duly signed receipt for the said document.

Graham Kerr was in Sydney on 26 February when the matter came before the French Court. He was also in Sydney when the letter from the French Consul arrived and again on 9 July when the case came before the French court. Whether he actually collected 'the said document' is debatable. I found my copy in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris. Perhaps he took no notice knowing that as a British subject the French courts in Noumea and Vila had no jurisdiction over him.

Whether he should have is debatable. If he had appeared and made a public nuisance of himself, the British authorities would have been compelled to take notice as had been the case with Leo Layard, British Vice-Consul to New Caledonia and his spirited defence of Donald Macleod's property at Havannah Harbour against the French in 1886. However the Foreign Office now had no say in Condominium affairs, only the Colonial Office and it preferred to turn a blind eye to problems with its French Condominium partner. There is no mention in Graham Kerr's diary of the summons.

On 30 August 1936 the Justice of the Peace sitting in the French Court in Vila handed down the following judgement in the case between the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* 'under the control

of the State' which had its head office in Paris and was represented by Maître Des Granges and Kerr Bros. Ltd of Sydney and G.L.S. Kerr of the same place 'jointly and severally'. They were summoned to present themselves in the French court on 9 July but did not appear. In default they were conjointly ordered to pay 3 million francs to cover the discrepancy in tree numbers found after taking over Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu by *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 1928, plus damages and court costs, plus Des Granges' fee and a committee of 'experts' was to be set up to work out the exact tree count on the two plantations when taken over in 1927.¹⁵

It is important to know that the points leading up to the condemnation in default of the Kerrs were ones that would continue to be brought up until the case was finally aborted in 1952. These were the date of final payment 28 August 1928 at which the tree count was not mentioned, and the date of a meeting arranged 25 April 1928 at Turtle Bay by Vibert and Audoin in the presence of a French official from Santo to count the trees again. The French Resident at the time had his doubts and refused to allow the Bailiff of the Court in Vila to attend. D.H. Kerr, on his brother's orders from Paris, also refused to attend as this was something the French buyers ought to have done before they took up the three-month's option to buy. This caveat on the sale was what the French were trying to render null and void.

In any case the French themselves had not been able to agree on the tree count as I have shown already. The final clause of the original option was never mentioned until many years later when Kerr's then French lawyers forced their opposite numbers to take heed of certain papers Kerr had presented in evidence. The conclusion was that the lawyers conducting the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* case—always directed from Paris—had never seen them.

To find a committee of experts to determine the tree count was not as easy as the available French documentation states. In a letter to the Director *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* from Des Granges dated 24 August 1936, Houchard, Ratard and Gané, a replacement for Leon Wright, were chosen.¹⁶ What he did not say was that the three of them stated it was impossible to count the number of trees after eight years when a number of years notably 1928 had severe cyclones. Their refusal was followed up by similar refusals from Rimbert, Pouillet, Theuil, Naturel, Perronnet, Caillard, Harbulot, Coulon, Deplanque, Dedieu, Rolland and de Sonnevillie, most with at least 25 years experience of the New Hebrides.

In the end Des Granges settled for Colardeau, Emile Ohlen and Rene Thevenin, all living in Vila, and he took them to Santo to show them what they had to do. They returned with the answer required in under a week and presented their report on 14 December. Colardeau immediately left the Group, not intending to return and before he completed his task.¹⁷ By 14 December 1936 the 'experts' had calculated the debt Kerrs owed to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* as now 4,264,890 francs 93 centimes. The debt was rising.

Des Granges was sure that setting up the committee of experts would force the Kerrs to come to court and said that he needed no outside help and if he needed to discuss the finer points of British law he would do so in Australia.¹⁸

Yet throughout the year Graham Kerr had several meetings with Des Granges, who he had known in a friendly way for years, and on 19 November when Kerr was in Vila with Henri Guillemot, a Frenchman employed by Kerr Bros, Des Granges picked them up 'and drove us to Bellevue—Once up there was like being in another country—splendid—drove us round the plantation. M. Des Granges has a very broad outlook and I think will go far'.¹⁹ After a very pleasant evening he drove them back to Vila.

Was my father just naïve or did it not occur to him that a person could be so 'two-faced'? As an unprotected British subject, to be up against the full force of a part of the French Government was outside his range of experience and indeed outside that of any other British subject in the New Hebrides at that time.

Enquiries about the Kerrs, going on in Sydney since August 1932, were brought up to date on 28 October 1936 with information about Kerr Bros. Ltd, the new company registered 23 November 1928 and carrying on the business formerly carried on by the old one that which had been set up in 1909.²⁰

When a visit was made to the company's address recently, the Managing Director, Graham Kerr was reported to be absent in the Islands. The secretary, one Miller [George

Millar, Deputy Director] stated that the Directors remained the same as formerly. Paid up capital was 20,000 pounds ...

The company holds the bulk of the shares in *Société Kerr/My* Ltd registered in Noumea, having a plantation in the New Hebrides valued at about 25 thousand pounds ... a reconstruction of East Santo Plantations which was registered in Sydney and was now in voluntary liquidation, the change having been brought about owing to great concessions obtained by the business as a French company. In concluding the interview [Millar] said that he was not obliged to give further details without consulting the Managing Director.

The report concluded.

The company is regarded as having important assets in the shape of properties in the Islands and has all along given the impression of being well supplied with capital

In other words the company was 'ripe for the picking'.

All through the year the Julliens in Marseilles maintained in close contact about the finer points of setting up *Société Kerr/My* and the business with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, managed for them by Maurice Valette.

In a letter written to Valette on 19 June, Graham Kerr was undecided as to the position to take about the family shares in which the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* were showing interest:

As you are in France, the only place we can take any action for effective representation, it may be more practical for you to hold them in trust... In that case you could act at a moments' notice, without waiting for special authority. If we can get other shareholders to support us in trying to get a 'clean up', it would be important for you to be able to act quickly. Monsieur Joyer knows practically all the shareholding in the *Société* and it should be possible to move against the present corruption.

The Aupied/Raoul-Duval gang are well entrenched, with a very obedient following on the *Conseil*. There is much of the *Légion d'honneur* amongst them but very little honour, I would say²¹. What I cannot understand is that the *Commissaire du Gouvernement*—M Campion—has made no stand ... the Government holds a large voting power, which, if used in the direction of clean administration, should make it possible to stop the 'exploiters' carrying on the ruination of the *Société*.

Graham Kerr considered the 1934 balance sheet as 'eye-wash'... 'What is the necessity of paying a man of Vibert's capacity 108,000 francs per annum plus primes for this, that and the other?'

It is not hard to see that Vibert would be doing his level best to get even. In fact in his reply on 6 July to Kerr's letter, Valette wrote that it was very evident that the *Conseil Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was trying to annoy Kerr in every way and he was not liked by the Aupied set.

Valette thought it expedient to try and put all the Kerr shares under his own name. Then he would have no need of Power of Attorney, and Kerr's name would no longer appear before the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, which certainly wanted to harm him. He knew Kerr had absolute trust in him but thought the proposition needed to be given in writing. He was arranging with the Jullien brothers to guarantee that they really belonged to the Kerrs.

Replying to Kerr's criticism of the *Conseil*, Valette agreed that they were indeed a gang of thieves and scoundrels. 'I am afraid we can do absolutely nothing. Unhappily those who could help you, and who intervened at the time of the formation of *Société Kerr/My*, are now isolated due to a change of government in May 1936 that brought in a complete change to the Ministry.'

Valette continued that he could still intervene in the government through the Minister for the Marine who was also the Mayor of Marseilles. He had the support of a Deputy Member in the Commission for Colonies too. The Government's plural vote with its *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*

shares made it impossible for shareholders to mount a protest. He was consulting with Joyer and would keep Kerr informed as to how Aupied's case was going before the law courts.

While Valette interested himself in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* matters in Paris, the Jullien brothers in Marseilles interested themselves in the welfare of the new company *Société Kerr/My* in Noumea.

Kerr told them on 3 July that:

We shall gradually work to get more of New Hebrides products going to you. We could very well do with a young man, speaking French and English to travel through the islands occasionally. The main production in the New Hebrides is at Santo, except native [produced] copra, and I am trying to get a Planters' Association formed there. If this comes into being, there will be more co-ordinated working, and I shall push for standardised grades of produce. I am writing to the two Governments [Condominium] urging inspection and grading of produce, as is done with copra at Rabaul ... Without any certified grading there is no inducement to turn out the better article.²²

Rabaul was different. New Hebrides was a Condominium and as neither party owned the place outright, the French and British were chary of any expensive developments, however necessary. The good of all was not considered. The matter of Indigenous participation was quite out of the question as in 1936 'colonisation' was not yet a dirty word. But islander-produced copra found a ready market and was increasing and had been encouraged by Graham Kerr in earlier years on Tongoa.

Th. Jullien on 23 July picked up on what Graham Kerr had said about employing a French man in the business and put forward the name of Marcel Neveu aged 41, whom he had known since he was 16. Born at Réunion but educated in France, he spoke and wrote English fluently. Jullien outlined his qualifications and highly recommended him. In his reply on 19 August Kerr said that he had already appointed Henri Guillemot of New Caledonia in the job but for no fixed period. He was worried that with his high qualifications Neveu would expect a very high salary.

I would like, eventually, to get a man of good standing and ability to come into the business so that I could retire from taking an active part. [He was now almost 63.] It would be necessary for anyone taking up an important position with *Société Kerr/My* to take up shares. We have some 370 shares available, still within our registered capital of 1,500,000 francs.

He told Jullien on 4 September that he was leaving for the New Hebrides at the end of the month taking Guillemot with him; making

... a comprehensive tour to Noumea and through New Hebrides on business. I hope that we shall get many to ship their produce direct to you.

Jules Jocteur seemed to be doing well in charge of Hog Harbour. They were applying for more Tonkinese labour as local labour being very difficult to obtain. He ended his letter asking if the Julliens had any lines they wished him to push in the Group and, if so, he needed full particulars and prices. The Julliens were finding that smoke-dried copra from the New Hebrides was very low grade. This Kerr realised.

We must come eventually to making hot-air-dried copra. I am pushing the Government for Government grading of produce, as is done in the other Groups of Islands... Of course plantations would have to install the necessary drying plants.²³

The Julliens, as shareholders in *Société Kerr/My*, sent authorisation for Kerr to represent them at the forthcoming first General Assembly on 5 October.

The brothers had discussed with Marcel Neveu the idea of employment with Kerr Bros. in Sydney. With regard to salary he asked to be given a chance and decent living conditions. It was a matter of him working hard and taking pains. How many shares would he need to take out?²⁴

On 24 July Graham Kerr told Valette that he and his family were in complete accord that their shares should be held in Valette's name:

We have complete confidence that you would do what is best in the interest of those concerned ... A combination of our interests and others outside the Aupied faction, might induce the Government (with their special voting power) to bring about a change to honest administration of these valuable properties.

He further proposed on 4 August that perhaps they could be used as security for the proposed overdraft limit of 75,000F at *Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris* at whose Marseilles branch they were deposited and with whose Sydney Branch Kerr Bros was dealing in the setting up of *Société Kerr/My*. He told Valette that he had seen the manager of the Sydney branch and the latter was writing to the Marseilles branch about the matter. *Société Kerr/My* expected to do all its business through the Sydney branch and he had told the Manager that, through all the years Kerr Bros had used the Bank of New South Wales, they had never used their overdraft there. He wanted to know Valette's opinion of this.

Valette replied on 21 August guaranteeing that, despite the fact the Kerr shares were in his name, they were not his property.

He did not think the bank would make any difficulties but he was afraid they represented very little at the bank. As a matter of fact these titles have no value at present. The last quotation dated 1933, mentioned the rate of 32 frs.

He had not been able to meet the shareholders yet and said 'M. Joyer must be on holiday and has not replied to my last letters'.

In a letter 28 August Valette told Kerr that the *Comptoir National d'Escompte* in Marseilles had received the necessary letter from its Sydney branch which had extended its facilities to *Société Kerr/My* and that the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shares now valued at 36F were under his name in Marseilles and he hoped that Paris would not make difficulties.

Joyer had at last contacted Valette, telling him that Leon Vibert was now in Paris. *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* was engaged in making up the balance sheet for 1934. This was not an easy job as the earlier ones had been severely criticised by M. Lafont, Member of the House of Deputies and responsible for the dismissal of M. Germain, previous Chief Accountant *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. All balance sheets since 1930, when the plantation societies *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* were amalgamated into *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, now had to be justified.

Joyer had no information to give him about the renting out of the properties but he thought that the convention (or accord) reached with the State would compel *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to do so and that his impression was that it must be done without the consent of the shareholders. 'Naturally the gang Aupied-Duval will try to swallow the rest'. Joyer told him that the person in charge of the enquiry had already handed in a report. 'It will take some time before the Tribunal goes through it.'²⁵

Valette had more to say after seeing Joyer on 21 August. The above report was not favourable to Aupied and, trying to rectify the mistakes of M. Germain in the 1934 balance sheet was taking *Conseil* some doing. If done correctly it would show another loss of 4 to 5 million francs. After discussing the situation with Joyer, Valette thought that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* actually lost 100,000 francs each month.

The convention with the State obliged *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to stop commercial exploitation. Within a time-limit ending in 1937, the *Société* was to lease out its properties. Valette

warned Kerr that the *Conseil* seems not to be doing anything, but take 'heed dear Sir, after having ruined SFNH, the Aupied-Duval gang have found a way to enrich themselves with its spoils'.

Valette said the French Government is discouraged and wants nothing more to do with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. If the State would turn a blind eye, the Minister for Colonies would be delighted and Valette outlined the probable result. At the beginning of 1937 an Assembly of shareholders will be called and told that there will be no further agricultural exploitation. They will be told that in spite of all efforts nobody has been found to lease the properties in sections of 500 hectares. It will nevertheless be indicated that one offer has been made and the State, happy to be released from the problem, will happily accept.

The Aupied/Duval people were behind the sole offer and Valette told Kerr that he had found out the conditions which he told him in the strictest confidence. Land was to be leased out at 1 franc per hectare meaning that 4000 hectares of plantation land would be leased out at 4000 francs per annum which he considered ridiculous.

Since they first interested themselves in Graham Kerr's case with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, the Julliens and Valette had registered disgust that fellow Frenchmen had sunk so low. They considered it necessary that their nefarious dealings should be made public.

Valette wanted Kerr to sound out public opinion in the New Hebrides. Perhaps *Société Kerr/My* could put up a proposal to lease 7000 hectares covering the former properties of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, namely Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations and land in the vicinity of Hog Harbour. What did Kerr think? His on the spot knowledge was essential. One franc per hectare for such valuable land was ridiculous.

Why don't we propose a figure based on the product-yield of the properties, and he sketched out hypothetical figures for the various crops, copra and cacao. *Société Kerr/My* to get its fair share of the proceeds and the surplus to be divided between *Société Kerr/My* and *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

If Kerr thought this was feasible, Valette would approach the governor of New Caledonia then in Paris. He would also intervene in person at the Ministry of Colonies and explain his position. This would also have the advantage of stopping the *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* from carrying out its plan as outlined. If they say no other offer has come forth, we reply 'Pardon, a proposition has been put forward [at such and such a date] and you refuse to look at it'.

Valette urgently needed a map of the Group showing the locations of the Kerr/My properties as well as those owned by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. 'It would be extremely valuable to me leading up to the discussions'. They had until 1937 to find an answer.

Then on 10 December the following was received at Kerr Bros Office in Jamison St. Sydney from the Manager of the Sydney branch of *Comptoir National d'Escompte*:

We have been instructed by our head office in Paris ... to advise you that the SFNH has placed an opposition (sic) on the shares of the SFNH which were deposited in their hands.²⁶

On 17 December 918 shares which *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* considered belonged to the Kerrs were officially sequestrated with a view to find their true ownership. The *Conseil Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had taken the further precaution of placing a distraint order on them through the *Tribunal de Commerce*.

Graham Kerr only arrived back in Sydney from the New Hebrides on 15 December and on 18 December he wrote to Valette telling him that Aupied and friends were making efforts to get at him in some way. They were 'pushing on a case in the French court at Vila against Kerr Bros. Ltd and against me. I learned when I arrived at Vila in September that the case had proceeded to a certain stage, and this week I received documents through the post; one set addressed to me and one set ...to Kerr Bros. Ltd', and he sent his set to Valette.

He then went into the history of the conflict he had had with Vibert and Aupied regarding the tree count saying that he had probably heard all about it from Joyer. 'Our count and indications were approximately correct and they were even confirmed by one of their representatives who made the comprehensive count on their behalf. His count was however suppressed'. Aupied had tried to withhold payment but Kerr refused to hand over the properties until the money was paid. 'In English we have an old law ... that it is for the buyer to ascertain what he is buying before accepting or taking up the option we gave.' All this took place in 1927.

Now, nearly 10 years afterwards, a count of trees is asked for.

About the case against him in Vila

I do not know how these people can proceed against me in the French Court, to which I cannot be called. Under the Joint control of France and Britain, certain procedure is laid down. As far as Kerr Bros. Ltd is concerned, the company of that name who sold to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* [in 1927] wound up in 1928. The present Kerr Bros. Ltd was not registered until 23 November 1928 and has no responsibility to anyone before that date.

He then told Valette about the sequestration order placed by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on the shares held by *Comptoir National d'Escompte* in Marseilles asking him to

... please take the necessary steps to protect the shares that you hold. How can these people make opposition to shares *au porteur* or now in your name?

He was sorry to trouble Valette but it was necessary for him to understand the 'underhand ways' of his opponents. In another letter to Valette on the same date, Graham Kerr mentioned a conversation he had in Vila with the French Resident Commissioner to New Hebrides, M. Casimir, about the rental proposition put forward by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. Casimir had recently been in Paris where it had been put before him and he was asked to make enquiries on his return to the Group. Casimir then realised that what he had been told in Paris was different from the scheme Aupied and Vibert were trying to work in New Hebrides. He noted that 'little by little, all the former staff [on the plantations] would be changed by men belonging to the Aupied-Duval company'.

From my father's diary for 1936 I now realise that the tremendous strain he was under made it impossible for him to be the calm attentive father his family so badly needed.²⁷ My mother and youngest



Photo 66: Kerr family taken at Kermadec standing in front of the Chevrolet: Len, Graham, Joyce Kerr, Dudley Bogg (a friend of Gem's and later to be her husband), Nancy, Muriel (Gem) and Katherine Kerr 1935-36

sister provided the unquestioning warmth he needed and appreciated. The rest of us, mostly teenagers, had to fend for ourselves. It was Depression time and life was difficult for most people and we really had no idea that our family life, which made my father so angry, was unique although our mother tried to make us understand.

If anyone had told Graham Kerr when he sold out to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 1927 that by 1936, there would be a proposition afoot in France that he, a British subject, step in and save the bankrupt *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*—which had swallowed *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 1930—he would not have believed them. Yet that was what had been put to him by both Joyer and Valette.

By so doing he might also restore the value of the big Kerr shareholding in *Société Française des*

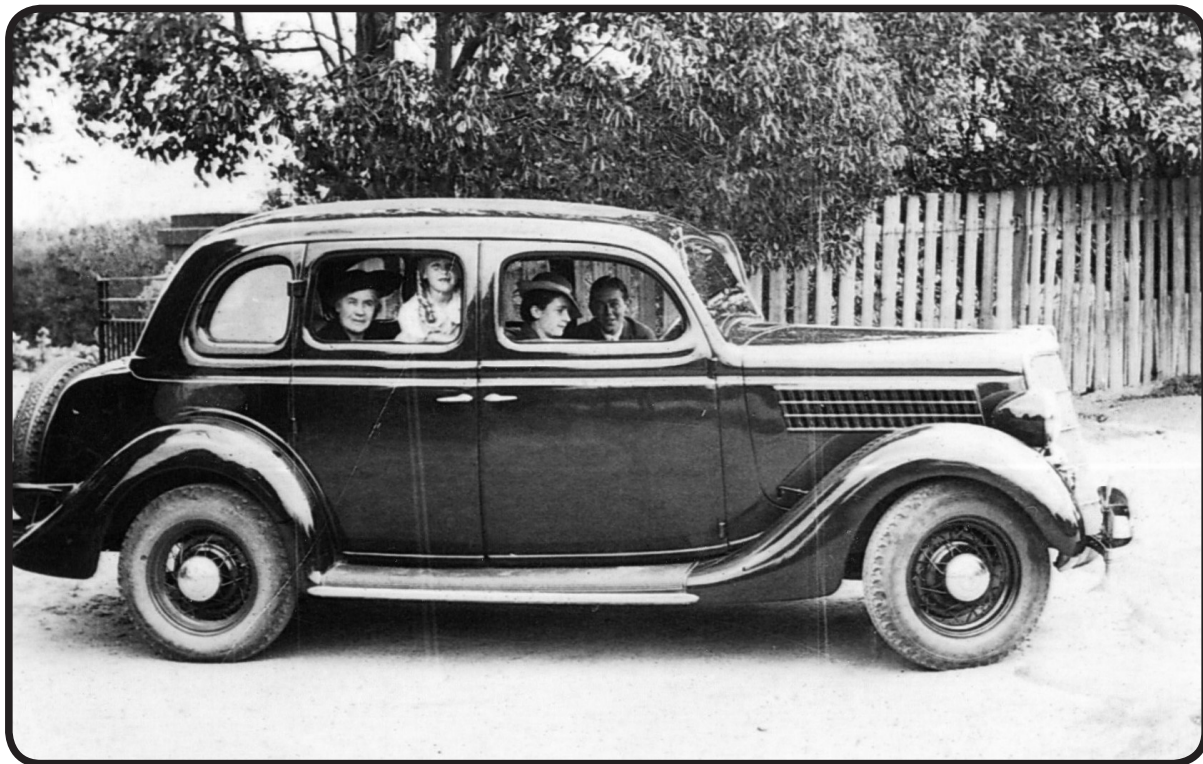


Photo 67: 1936 in the Chevrolet with Muriel (Gem) Kerr driving with Len Kerr in the front and in the back her mother Muriel and Nancy Kerr

Nouvelles Hébrides as well as helping other shareholders. Also, if the plan succeeded, the Julliens' company in Marseilles might well benefit at the expense of Raoul-Duval in Le Havre, although that was not their main consideration. As decent Frenchmen they would be happy to put an end to just one more of the financial scandals involving some members of the French Government that besmirched the French political scene; the most recent being that of Alexandre Stavisky.

Everything Graham Kerr did in 1936 would be done with these possibilities in mind as we shall see.

He started the year at Hog Harbour plantation which he found in its usual state of disorganisation. On 3 January 1936, all available labour was set to clearing up rubbish which had been allowed to litter the place. This was finished by midday when the labour was given the afternoon and the next day off for the New Year holiday. He and Coates went in *Toa* with Francois up to Port Olry where Auguste Harbulot 'has a big sing-sing on for the New Year and asked us to stay the night'.

On 5 January he was back at Hog Harbour again and went to inspect the vacant British Agency. He remarked the 'buildings are falling to pieces and everything in a state of decay'.

Next day he and Coates went south in *Toa* to visit the Coulons at Shark Bay and stayed the night, the 'Coulons, very kind to us.' Then further south to My's place where he discussed business with Mme. My as Jean My was away in Noumea. Next stop was Aisse to visit Naturel and leave a case of dynamite he had ordered. Then they visited Pallikula where they stayed the night with Michel Pascal and his

wife—‘a very nice couple’. Here they also met M. Vidal, Malo agent for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

On 8 January they left for Aore to Mazoyer’s. ‘He is set up better than any place I have seen in the Islands; machinery, electric power, nice house, electric light, electric refrigeration, radio etc. He is giving us his Sydney agency’. Next, to Deplanque’s and Jules Douyere’s and finally to Houchard’s at Segond Channel, who had just left for Hog Harbour to see the new rotary hoe installed there in action. Coates and Francois returned immediately to Hog Harbour to try and intercept him, while Kerr stayed at Segond with ‘Louis Houchard and his young bride ... the daughter of one of the Swallows’.

Houchard was back by 9 January and the next day he went with Kerr to the French Government office at Segond to help him arrange for 12 Tonkinese labourers (10 men and 2 women) to come from Indo-China by the next *Laperouse*. ‘Houchard is taking 10 shares in SKM ... a good man to have in.’ Other people he visited while staying with Houchard were Ratard, the French Residency where he played tennis; and *Comptoir Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, Ballande’s Segond Agency, and de Sonnevile.

After a visit to Henri Gané, they got away on 15 January in Houchard’s craft for Malekula where they visited Edmond Caillard at Norsup where Graham Kerr slept ashore. After being shown round the plantation he was sent in Houchard’s craft to Bushman’s Bay where he was to await the *Morinda* on its way north. While there he was made welcome by F.J. Fleming and his daughter Betty.²⁸ ‘Oscar Newman is working here.’ There was quite a gathering to meet the *Morinda* the Lançons, Savoies, Theuils, Draghicewicz, the Corlettes and others.

Got my things on board ... we are due to leave at 11 o’clock tonight. Asked Fleming and his daughter and Oscar Newman and his fiancée (Mlle. Savoie) to dinner on *Morinda* dancing in the evening.

After visiting the New Hebrides Mission station at Tangoa and the Seventh Day Adventists at Aore they arrived at Luganville where Captain Perry of *Morinda* asked the French Resident M. and Mme. Lainé on board to dinner. Perry was ill, so he asked Kerr to be the host. *Morinda* left during the night for Aoba, on the return trip to the south.

Vila was reached on 21 January where they found the *Eridan* just in from Marseilles via Panama and received the news that King George V had died in London. Before leaving Vila for Noumea on *Laperouse* Kerr saw various people on business and paid his respects to the French Resident. He conferred with Des Granges who was then busy drawing up the case against him on behalf of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, though Graham Kerr did not yet know it.

While in Noumea he was busy with Board meetings of *Société Kerr/My* with Catalan, Ducasse and others and noted ‘all formal matters now in order’. Then on his way back to Sydney with its hectic activities including many requests given him by clients he had met in the New Hebrides. Kerr Bros. Ltd carried no stock but fulfilled orders through its agencies for example by providing wicker furniture for Houchard and Gané.

On 11 February he received a letter from George Joy the British Resident Commissioner to tell him that the question of payment of the balance and interest claimed by you on behalf of your client regarding the Petersen Estate purchased by His Majesty’s government 1904 in now receiving further



Photo 68: Taken about 1936. The Kerr children’s grandmother, Mrs Sydney Edward Hutton (1864–1953), Lucy Hutton (née Martin), Muriel Kerr’s mother—taken at Dalmar Studio Crows Nest.

consideration by the High Commissioner and the Secretary of State for Colonies. Joy then mentioned a rumour that had been circulating in Vila that the land not yet paid for has been put up for sale. Joy said:

I am ... convinced that you are not likely to prejudice the issue at the present stage by premature action or without consulting me.

Graham Kerr replied to this polite threat on 5 March saying

I would point out that the settlement of this matter has been held up by the British authorities for nearly thirty years! Miss Petersen has been left without means of livelihood for many years. She has a home with Miss M. I. Kerr to tide her over this period. Appeals to British authority have been in vain.

It is true that when I was recently in Vila I made enquiries re the possibility of selling some of Miss Petersen's interests. Premature action at this stage is difficult to apply ... The land in question is all that on the east side of the main street of Vila belonging to Miss Petersen—beach-front land. [Hence not part of the disputed land.]²⁹

On 18 February, he had received a radio from Vila with an offer to buy Annie Petersen's beach-front property. This was likely to be behind Joy's letter. Knowing of Kerr's dealings with the French, Joy was perhaps giving him the cold shoulder. The insulting treatment meted out to British settlers by their own part of the Condominium was indeed hard to take.

During this time Graham Kerr looked for the latest steam-drying machinery in Sydney. This was in an attempt to bring New Hebrides produce for all settlers to the standard of that of Rabaul which was Australian Mandated Territory and not under two conflicting governments.

Julius Petersen, a Dane who had opted for French nationality, and whose plantation at Mate Wulu had been sold with Turtle Bay in 1927, the tree count of which was also the subject of dispute with Aupied, was in Sydney on 18 February and dined at our home. Throughout the long-drawn out case Petersen's name would not appear amongst the defaulters, only Kerr Bros. Ltd. and G.L.S. Kerr who had acted as his agent.

Graham Kerr's visit to Jules Douyere and Savoie while in the Islands had paid off as he was commissioned to buy boats for them in Sydney. The Mys also wanted a truck.

There is no mention in his diary of the proclamation in the French Court in Vila of the case against him at the end of February. Perhaps he did not know of it until he got the notice from the French Ambassador on 19 March but there was no comment in the diary.

By 9 April it was time for another visit to the Islands. *Laperouse* arrived at Noumea on 13 April, a public holiday, so the whole population seemed to be there to meet the ship. He had several meetings with the Catalan and Ducasse about *Société Kerr/My* before leaving for Vila where he met with George Joy, Des Granges, Fricotte, Noel who was interested in the Annie Petersen property, and others, before leaving for the north.

Leon Vibert, Aupied's man on the spot and still Director of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in the New Hebrides, and his wife were also on board when *Laperouse* arrived at Turtle Bay. The atmosphere would have been very tense and even more so if Graham Kerr knew exactly what Vibert was doing to ruin his reputation.

Then they went to Port Olry—for no reason that Kerr could see as no cargo was unloaded or loaded or passengers landed or taken on board. Only then did the vessel return south to Hog Harbour. He was very critical of the French Government-owned *Messageries Maritimes* to which *Laperouse* belonged, and its captain who after wasting a whole day going to Port Olry would only stay to load 40 of the 60 tons of cargo from Hog Harbour that was ready waiting in punts. Kerr landed, 'dead tired after a very trying time'. Was Vibert behind this nastiness?

Jules Jocteur and his wife were now settling in at Hog Harbour and the new Tonkinese labourers were also being settled into their quarters. Next day Kerr paid a short visit with Jocteur in *Toa* south to Shark Bay to the Coulons to leave a message with them asking that *Bucephale* call at Hog Harbour and pick up the balance of the copra left behind by *Laperouse*.

Among the many tasks awaiting attention was to pay off time-expired labour. This meant opening up the Store so they could buy things to take with them. This time he took 60 pounds during one afternoon. On 26 April Francois was due to return them to their homes in *Toa* and then continue with a recruiting trip. Alan Thomas, Condominium District Agent who had replaced Salisbury, was first taken down to the Canal.

Now that Jules Jocteur was settling in as manager, Keith Coates, who had been employed for one year in 1935 when Hog Harbour was East Santo Plantations, still run as a British plantation and struggling to pay its way, was given notice from the end of July. Coates wanted to stay in the Group and next day, when Ballandes' launch with its Second Channel manager arrived on its way to Port Olry, he went with it to see if Harbulot could employ him after that time.

Graham Kerr was busy bringing to an end the management of East Santo Plantations and checking to see how Jocteur would shape as the first manager of *Société Kerr/My*. On 1 May they went out to the Point where he got first-hand knowledge of the hurricane that struck earlier in the year. 'The Point suffered severely in the blow, hundreds of coconut trees being blown down'.

On 11 May, leaving Coates in charge, Kerr and Jocteur left for the Canal where they had various matters to 'square up' with the French Administration. The trip also included visits to the Mazoyers where they stayed overnight and to the Deplanques and Douyeres and Houchards. After a visit to the hospital to see one of their labourers there, they 'stayed ashore for the night and were made very welcome by M. and Mme. Ratard and [their son] Jean'.

As he had arranged with Valette in France, Kerr sounded out French settlers as to their support; these including Naturel, Cassin, de Somerville and Dedieu. He also saw Hagen to offer him rice from Saigon as they had 'good orders for rice'. Then, with a labourer now released from hospital and another for Harbulot, they left in *Toa* for Hog Harbour, staying overnight at Pallikula with Michel Pascal en route.

On 15 May Francois took him up to Port Olry to see Harbulot and *Père* Audouin and the next day a note was sent down to Shark Bay inviting Raymond Coulon up for the weekend. 'I am arranging for him to give a hand here at stocktaking time.' Kerr was also busy 'getting all accounts ready to square the balance of labour under the British Register'. He was doing the last things that needed doing before leaving Jocteur to take over the job with Coulon to help. Before Kerr left, Alan Thomas, British District Agent, was invited to dinner which hospitality he returned. And when *Toa* left for the Canal on 23 May, Thomas came too. They collected Mlle. Coulon at Shark Bay on the way and also called on the My's at Sara, only to find that Jean My was already at the Canal.

Leaving Thomas at the Government Agency where Kerr paid some dues, they delivered Mlle. Coulon to the hospital and paid the Hog Harbour Hospital account. The Mazoyers were at the Canal with their son Bobby who was to accompany Graham Kerr to Sydney where he was to go to school. Kerr excused himself from all hospitality at Houchard's place and 'went on board *Toa* as I am dead tired after having practically no sleep last night'. There still remained business to see to with Jean My, Houchard and the Ratards before going to Dart Anchorage where they found *Morinda*. They went alongside with *Toa* and put Kerr's luggage on board and off-loaded cargo for Hog Harbour. By the time they checked to see if all was correct *Morinda* had gone along to Luganville and that is where *Toa* next went to 'off-load' Kerr before Francois returned to Hog Harbour.

When *Morinda* reached Vila on 27 May Kerr paid a visit to Des Granges, went up to the British Offices to see Mr Joy about Annie Petersen's property and had a long interview with Mr Ballard, Joint Court Counsel.³⁰ He had left Bobby Mazoyer at Mme Reid's hotel and hoped that they would be able to get away in *Morinda* when she left later that day. After another visit to Des Granges, he found it necessary to stay longer and retrieved their luggage. The Keegans offered to put him up and Bobby stayed at Reids.

On 28 May he saw Ballard about the wording of the transfer to Arrighi of land belonging to Annie Petersen and signed the transfer of the Beachfront to Arrighi with Des Granges later in the day:

To tennis with Keegan after 4pm. We got in two sets: Blandy and I versus Keegan and partner, winning one set each.

He bought tickets for himself and Bobby by *Van Rees* which was to leave on 1 June. Before that he arranged for Jack de Preville to go north by *Laperouse* to help Jules Jocteur at Hog Harbour. While in Noumea he received a telegram from George Joy in Vila at last agreeing to the settlement of the Petersen property.³¹

To his utter distaste, which I am sure he would not have hidden, who should be fellow passengers and also guests at the Captain's table with himself but M. and Mme. Vibert on their way back to France.

His diary puts his bad feeling down to the 'rice table' (or *rijsttafel*) that the Dutch captain had served in their honour; all items enumerated in the diary. Something I am sure he would have enjoyed in different company—'Then the Captain topped it by "shouting" beer for all at the table—no wonder the Dutch are fat'—Kerr was no beer drinker. He drank wine. The poor captain did not realise the deep chasm of distrust that divided his guests. If he knew what Vibert was doing to revenge himself on Kerr, he would probably have arranged his dinner guests accordingly.

Back in Sydney on 9 June 1936 Bobby Mazoyer stayed at our home while a school was arranged for him. 'Shore' where my brother was a pupil was first choice but eventually he was accepted by Mr Le Couteur at Newington College. Bobby stayed with us on weekends off.

Still angry at the way *Laperouse* had not picked up the whole copra cargo at Hog Harbour during his recent visit Graham Kerr visited Burns Philp to see if he could arrange for *Morinda* to call.

On 21 June he was trying to form a Planters Association for Santo as discussed with Valette. He always hoped that both British and French settlers could come together to improve the standard of production for all; something very difficult in a place where both Governments distrusted each other despite the fact that most of their settlers showed genuine *entente*, while at the same time, believing it would be much easier under one government.

As part of Kerr Brothers Sydney activities Graham Kerr tried to find a suitable convertible lorry or car for the Mys, looked for suitable craft for several clients, met boats from the islands and ferried clients, and friends for instance Mme. Reid and Mme. Ohlen, from vessels to their hotels. He dropped his children off at their schools on his way to work and arranged family picnics nearly every weekend. He hardly stopped to draw breath.

On 18 August he wrote to Louis Catalan in Noumea telling him that he was hoping that figures for the change over from East Santo Plantations to *Société Kerr/My* would be complete by the end of September so that a General Assembly could be held in Noumea in October. Copra was keeping up a satisfactory price but labour not so good. Eighteen more Tonkinese labourers were being requested. This, he thought, was better than depending on native labour although it necessitated considerable outlay.

Catalan's reply on 25 August presented him with more problems to solve. Still angered by the fact that *Laperouse* had not collected the full copra cargo from Hog Harbour, Kerr had consulted Catalan who handed on Kerr's useful suggestion that the *Messageries Maritimes* service be reorganised, to the French High Commissioner and the French Resident Commissioner. Catalan was not hopeful because *Messageries Maritimes* was not in favour.

Catalan was running into problems with French taxation laws for new companies and with bills from the French Resident for those Tonkinese labour who were already supplied. He, as President of *Société Kerr/My*, had no money to pay for these.³² Naturally there would have been differences in French and Australian business practice but looking back through the years I am left asking whether the Aupied faction was involved here.

Henri Guillemot started work with Kerr Bros on 3 August 1936. It was arranged that he accompany Kerr around the Group to get to know clients. They left Sydney on *Morinda* on 17 September reaching Norfolk Island on 21 September where he and Guillemot scouted round for business:

Norfolk is really in a bad way with no industry going—they expect to do well with a Passion Fruit Pulping Factory that is being installed.

When they reached Vila on 24 September their luggage was transferred to *Bucephale* which was leaving for the north later than *Morinda*. While Kerr attended to business ashore, Guillemot showed prospective clients books of samples they had brought with them. They left for the north on 27 September. At

Mai Guillemot was introduced to Morrison Neil. On reaching Pauma they received news that France had gone off the gold standard. At Port Sandwich they called in on Cariou, at Ranon they saw Mitchell and at Duindui, Aoba, they visited Purdy's. On 1 October Kerr wrote in his diary, 'Miss Carter, who came down with us from Sydney on the *Morinda* from Sydney, was married to George Purdy yesterday'.

After visiting Port Patteson in the Banks Group, *Bucephale* headed for Port Olry where they visited Harbulot who 'is shipping some cacao for us'. Next they visited Hog Harbour where they only had a few minutes ashore as there was no cargo to pick up. Guillemot was introduced to the Jocteurs and Kerr thought the place looked very much better.³³

Then they went to Turtle Bay:

Went ashore to have a look around—went for a long walk in the cacao fields on top—the place is in a very bad state except down below. The coconuts up the hill about the old house site are simply running wild with undergrowth, difficult to push one's way through. There is no doubt there is wonderful country on the plateau where the cacao fields are.

The plateau behind Turtle Bay plantation was where—as he had told Vibert—development should take place. Back on board *Bucephale* he 'took notes'. After calling at Mate Wulu and Sara plantation, south of Shark Bay where they visited Mme. My, they called at Saraoutou and stopped for the night at Surunda. Then they visited Aisse where they hoped to see Naturel but he was in Vila; then to 'Hawkesby's old place on Malo Pass and later... to Barclays'. They ended up on 6 October at *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* anchorage at Luganville where they stayed the night.

Graham Kerr—as he had told Valette he would do—was making himself and Guillemot known in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* territory which Aupied and Vibert at this very time in Paris were arranging to lease to their own benefit at 1 franc per hectare. Kerr was also suggesting to these people, all of whom he knew—many as satisfied clients of Kerr Brothers—that they ship their products via *Société Kerr/My* to the Julliens in Marseilles which was the terminus of *Messageries Maritimes* vessels, rather than to Raoul-Duval in Le Havre *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*'s favoured agent.

On 6 October B.C. Ballard, who was acting for the Kerrs, was authorised by Miss A.G. Kerr, official liquidator of East Santo Plantations, to hand over all documents and processes concerning East Santo Plantations land claims to Des Granges in Vila.³⁴

Meantime Kerr and Guillemot were continuing their tour through the Group on board *Bucephale*. There was a rumour that France had gone off the gold standard which meant that Kerr was in touch with Sydney about prices and exchange rates between the two currencies. Part of his trip was to show prospective clients samples of goods they could provide and their price. From Norsup, Malekula, they went south to Sarmette and Banen Bay. At Port Sandwich they found Francois waiting for them with *Toa* so they left *Bucephale*. Here they visited Meriau who had had a bad time in the last cyclone and Cariou where they were invited to dinner and received a good order from their sample books.

Then north to Banen Bay again where they called on Perronnet. 'We had dinner ashore—Perronnet was married in March last to Mlle. Dillensenger—a cousin of the Mys'. Then they went north to Tisman Bay where they visited Newman and showed samples to Thora Newman and de Sonnevillie. They were back at Sarmette by 12 October where they got good orders from Savoie, Theuil and Chevillard, as well as hospitality from Savoie. At Bushman Bay they saw the Flemings and Corlette and displayed their samples in Fleming's copra shed. The British District Agent, C.G. Adam, came to have a look at the samples too.³⁵ The final stop on Malekula was Norsup to see Caillard who gave them some orders. On their way back to Second Channel they stopped at Dubois' anchorage at Malo, doing business with Dubois and Grube, who was up from Paama Island.

Back at the Canal they met with all their clients the Ratards, Houchards, Dedieu, Deplanques and Douyeres getting good orders. Another new customer was Leon Wright who would now be shipping produce via *Société Kerr/My*. On 22 October they headed for Hog Harbour laden with cargo off-loaded from *Laperouse* at the Canal. Guillemot left *Toa* at Mys to work his way down to the Canal attending to business matters. He now knew his job and clients and could be left to get on with things. Kerr would pick him up at Mys the following week.

It can be seen that the respected firm of Kerr Bros. and its connection with *Société Kerr/My* and the import firm of Julliens at Marseilles was being made known by its managing director to a wide range of settlers both French and English, many of whom he already knew. No wonder Vibert was having difficulty getting 'experts' to do his dirty work for him even if many of the French were settled on land granted to them by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

The news back at Hog Harbour was very good. 'Jocteur has made a wonderful improvement to the place'. Kerr picked up Guillemot as arranged at Mys on 29 October and had *dejeuner* with Mme. My about whom he wrote 'she is full of kindness, loading us up with vegetables and some meat'. They again visited Naturel at Aisse from whom they took an order before going to Shark Bay to visit the Coulongs.

On 1 November they left Hog Harbour in *Toa* for Sakau Island. Jocteur, Guillemot and Jaques de Preville were on board and this probably their first visit there where they found castor seed awaiting collection. The visit to introduce Guillemot was now almost over. Harbulot came down from Port Olry and gave Guillemot a good order while Kerr cleared up the plantation books for October and starting fresh ones for November. On 2 November 'Chevillard and Bain along—Chevillard and his captain (McCoy) stayed to dinner and did not leave much before midnight'.

Morinda arrived at Hog Harbour on 9 November with considerable cargo including timber and fibrolite to build houses for the expected Tonkinese labour. With Kerr and Guillemot on board she left for the south the same day. They left the ship at Vila on 11 November and put up at Mme. Reid's:

There is a ball on this evening for Armistice Day [end of World War 1]—it is at Stade Rossi—I went and enjoyed it very well—all Vila there.

On 16 November they called on M. Casimir, the French Commissioner, and at the French Government Offices about the Tonkinese labour and visited the French Judge to talk about *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and in the 'afternoon called on Ballard, the miserable successor of Wallace'.³⁶

This is the only reference in the diary to the case brought by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in the French Court on 30 July at which he had not appeared. It seems that he was not getting much satisfaction from either the French Judge or from the Australian lawyer, Ballard, who would represent him.

Much was hidden from Kerr at the time. The *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* lawyer, Des Granges, took Kerr and Guillemot to his home at Bellevue and Kerr came away with the idea that his host was a man of very broad sympathies. Perhaps he was, but maybe too broad.

During the visit Guillemot met many of Kerr's Vila friends including the Frouins, Pujols, Angers and Jules Jocteur's parents.

They left for Noumea on *Ville de Strasbourg* on 23 November where *Société Kerr/My* affairs immediately came to the fore. Fortunately Jean My was in Noumea staying with his in-laws, the Russ family, and Jean accompanied Kerr and Guillemot to Catalan's:

Catalan is trying to place all the obstacles he can in the way of smooth working [of *Société Kerr/My*]. I objected to calling in Ducasse as Coursin is solicitor to the Company—did not get very far—it looks as if we will have to put Catalan out.

Catalan was the president of *Société Kerr/My* and tendered his resignation on 24 November. On 29 November Kerr was working on the balance sheet to put before the shareholders of the new company. He was also consulting Coursin: 'I want to make sure that Catalan cannot play a trick on us'. Not surprisingly, the character of this once trusting man was beginning to change.

He had an interview with M. Siadous, the retiring Governor of New Caledonia, before Siadous left in *Ville de Strasbourg* to return to France.

The first annual meeting of *Société Kerr/My* took place on 4 December at its registered office, 18 Rue Sebastopol, Catalan's residence. It was a low key affair.

Only Jean My, Catalan, Guillemot and I there—Guillemot acting as Secretary. Catalan did not try obstruction, probably seeing it was no use... Did not nominate Catalan

to the *Conseil*—named Leleu as *Commissaire aux comptes* for 1936–1937 returns. Elected Jean My, D.H [Kerr] and I as *Conseil*.

Their headquarters was now to be at George Ventrillon's place at 26 Rue de l'Alma. From the Director's report, I gathered that the first six months:

... had been rather a difficult period, with considerable outlay for registration expenses and for the introduction of the first batch of Tonkinese labourers. Unfortunately the New Hebrides ... suffered a severe cyclone in... February; the SK/M property being considerably damaged in common with others. Notwithstanding—up to the 30 June—there were fair deliveries of copra and prospects... appear very good. Prices obtained at Marseilles ... for copra are very satisfactory and values appear to be advancing...³⁷

Since the commencement of operations ... we have had very good relations with the Government departments controlling administration in New Hebrides. Mr Casimir, the Resident Commissioner, is most sympathetic to legitimate operations.

Graham Kerr was now dealing with final matters before returning to Sydney, picking up all documents about *Société Kerr/My* from Catalan, and calling at the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* to take out a draft for 27,516 francs to pay for introduction of 18 Tonkinese due to arrive in *Pierre Loti*.

There was no chance of a passage on *Van Rees* but, when *Capitaine Illiaquer* arrived on 8 December from Sydney with the new Governor (M. Marchessou) on board, Guillemot managed to wangle passages for them. It was terrible accommodation over the propeller for which they paid first class fares but at last they were going home; though not to Sydney but Port Kembla *Capitaine Illiaquer's* first port of call.

Too impatient to wait there, they caught the train to Sydney, leaving their heavy luggage on board to be collected in Sydney. Graham Kerr 'gave them a surprise at the office' which was not expecting him and after attending to the ordering of some goods to return on the *Illiaquer*, he went home and gave us a surprise too: 'Glad to be home' and pleased because 'copra has gone to a splendid price'.

On 16 December he was in town at 7 am to meet the *Van Rees* due into No.11 Walsh Bay at 7.30 am. The ship had Monsieur and Mme. Dedieu on board and 'he is very ill'. Next day *Capitaine Illiaquer* arrived and there was a hectic rush retrieving luggage and getting it through Customs and to the office and helping other people to deal with theirs.

On 18 December he was busy with airmail to the Julliens about *Société Kerr/My* and to Valette about the case held in the French court on 30 August which he did not attend. The fact that he defaulted would in the near future be made to appear the action of a guilty man, not that of a defiant man who knew he was innocent and that the French court was not entitled to try him. In French law, unlike British law, one is guilty until proved innocent and his opponents were prepared to stop at nothing to prove his guilt. Would there be repercussions in Europe?

On 31 December 1936, after attending a Hogmanay Dinner at Farmers with my mother, followed by dancing, which he loved, he was very tired. His diary noted that he 'went to bed about 11pm but got up again just before midnight—saw the old year out and the New Year in'

Endnotes

- 1 See Orange Clipped Folder No. 2 Jullien Letter File.
- 2 On 3 July 1936 my father sent Th. and Ed. Jullien a list of the holdings on SK/M as at June 30. He and his brother and three sisters were listed as well as the My Family. The Kerr Sydney solicitor, B.W. Perkins 100F, L. Catalan, 5,000F the brothers Jullien, 10,000F and Kerr Bros. Ltd Sydney 50,000F. Kerr Bros Ltd was still to be carried on in Sydney as a subsidiary of SK/M. See Orange Clipped Folder No. 2. Jullien Letter File.
- 3 See Black Envelope No. 3. Corres. With Maurice Valette.
- 4 On 12 June 1936 my father agreed to cancel Valette's suggestion that he buy the shares back from them. Valette now considered that this was the safest way to guard them.
- 5 The Julliens had used this bank for over 40 years and personally saw the management, hoping that as a result, 'you will receive a good welcome and facilities'.
- 6 My father was interviewed by the Sydney Manager on 13 Feb. SK/M, and with a gross capital of one million five hundred franc asked for acceptance by the Bank as a customer. It had 2610 fully paid up shares of 500 francs each with 390 left for future shareholders. It was proposed that from 31 March—the end of its financial year—the business of Kerr Bros of Sydney would also go to the French bank. 'At present our banking business is done through the Bank of N.S.W. with an overdraft of one thousand pounds which has never been called on'. My father told the Manager that he himself had applied for French naturalisation. He was told on 18 Feb that as 'your society is a French one and ... French law in the administration of societies is fairly strict ... we must follow the prescriptions of the French law in question'.
- 7 See White Envelope No. 1 *Société Kerr/My* File for All Catalan letters.
- 8 Inskip for one, and on 1 Jan 1936, when Mark Reynolds arrived in Sydney, he was given one month's notice. My late sister Muriel, aged nineteen then, and employed at Kerr Bros as typist, told me many years later that she was present at an angry meeting when it was discovered that Reynolds had been carrying on a relationship with an Indigenous girl from a tribe that lived near the plantation. Although my father had close friends who visited our home in such relationships, he thought it not appropriate in this case and I am sure would not have countenanced any such relationship for his own children.
- 9 A Professor of Law at the Sorbonne named Hamel was consulted, vital documents being withheld from him. Many years later, just before the trial was aborted, one of SFNH's lawyers in Noumea said that if the Professor had seen all the documents, now revealed, he would never have supported the case.
- 10 Interestingly when the condemnation against the firm of Kerr Bros and separately against G.L.S. Kerr on 30 July 1936 was brought down in their absence, a sum of 10,500 francs was mentioned as being paid over to them on 28 August 1928 which covered the sale of movables, equipment etc. which had gone through according to plan. Trees were not mentioned in this document, signed on 28 August 1928 by my father. It was aborted when the French said that my father's Power of Attorney had expired. A new agreement signed by Audouin for the French, and Wallace for my father on 11 October 1928 at the British Residency, following which the money owed to the sellers was paid over, thus completing the Act of Conveyance, would be completely disregarded in all future French attacks on my father. The Statute of Limitations in both French and British law, would have allowed the complaint of lack of trees in 1928. Why wait for 8 years when neither the original French company (CGFH) which bought the plantations existed, nor the original Kerr Bros Ltd. of which G.L.S. Kerr had been agent. After the sale it went into liquidation in November 1928 and a new one with the same name was set up to deal with the Kerr's now different interests. This play was later cooked up by Aupied and his powerful friends to 'get' my father for daring to question their dubious financial dealings.
- 11 See Folder No. 10. Xeroxes from *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris, 71 APC SFNH, Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*, under dates 'end of Jan' 1936; 10 Feb 1936 and 19 April 1936.
- 12 Des Granges behaviour was certainly strange. Even after the 26 Feb announcement in the French Court, he told my father that the French had no case against him. At the same time he changed his mind about the Joint Court's right to hear it, thereby doing him the greatest possible disservice. As a French citizen was Des Granges in some way threatened by the French Government in France?
- 13 In a letter to Vibert in Santo on 29 Feb Des Granges accused him of telling Aupied that he, Des Granges, was occupied in turning Kerr into a French company. 'This is a lie, I am no more involved in making Kerr a French company than I am in having Kerr naturalised. The lawyer of Messrs Kerr is Maitre Marcel Coursin of Noumea'.
- 14 On 1 May 1936 Des Granges told Vibert that the 'Kerr Bros Ltd' cited to appear before the French court on 9 July had now, no legal existence, 'having been dissolved in regular legal form in 1929. The new firm has no connection with the former and does not have the same shareholders'. From other documents he asked to be given the vital one—the special condition in the original *Acte de Vente* that made Aupied liable for what he signed when the option was taken up before the 3 months option ended was omitted. Instead the tree count rigged up by Audoin and Vibert on 25 April 1928, which D.H. Kerr refused to sign as not part of the original agreement, was to be

- used. The use of selected documents, while suppressing others through the years—up till 1952 in fact—when the case was withdrawn, was being set in place.
- 15 See Folder No. 10 for xeroxes from *Outre Mer* Archives 71 APC. SFNH Serie II. *Affaire Kerr*, 26 Feb 1936; 27 Feb 1936; 29 Feb 1936; 1 May 1936; 6 July 1936 and 30 Aug 1936.
 - 16 See Paris Notebook No. 2; pp. 16–17. Des Granges to Aupied 29 Aug 1936.
 - 17 See White Envelope No. 6 for signed copies of all these refusals which were sent to Kerr Bros in Sydney on 20 August 1937 by Paulin Ratard with a covering letter after the Kerrs had lost their appeal on 10 June 1937, again ‘in default’. The material dealt with here is to be found in the *Outre Mer* Archives APC. SFNH, Serie II. *Affaire Kerr*.
 - 18 He had also asked for Fernand Largeau’s report but nothing more would be heard of this as the report was favourable to the Kerrs.
 - 19 This beautiful plantation which had previously belonged to Fernand Largeau, was up in the hills behind Vila and hence cooler. Diary entry 19 Nov 1936.
 - 20 See Folder No.10. Xeroxes from *Outre Mer* Archives. 71 APC. SFNH Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*, arranged in chronological order. Report written in English covering 11 Aug 1932–7 Dec 1937.
 - 21 After writing to a long list of shareholders—all with the *Légion D’Honneur*—following his dismissal from the *Conseil* SFNH in Nov 1932, my father made the only witty remark I remember him making. ‘They were indeed legion, but honour was something else again.’
 - 22 See Orange Clipped Folder No. 2. Jullien Letter File in chronological order.
 - 23 See Orange Clipped Folder No. 2. Kerr to Jullien 16 Sept 1936.
 - 24 See Orange Clipped Folder No. 2. Jullien to Kerr 20 Oct 1936.
 - 25 See Black Envelope No. 3. Valette to Kerr 28 Aug 1936.
 - 26 Placed in the Valette Letter File for convenience sake.
 - 27 In February 1936 Katherine Kerr won a scholarship to East Sydney Technical College to study art but Graham Kerr insisted she found a job instead which she did, at the Sydney Public Library. Her life may have taken a very different course if she had become an artist rather than developing her library research skills (ed.)
 - 28 She was born at the New Hebrides Mission hospital on Ambrym just before it was destroyed in the volcanic upheaval in Dec 1913.
 - 29 See Yellow Folder No.9. History of the Vysuck Estate for both these letters. In this on-going matter, Miss Petersen’s interests were completely ignored by both British and French sides of the Condominium Government. The French were determined to take the part of her property that they wanted and the British to turn a blind eye and put off payment for the part they had bought but did not use—but refused to allow my father to sell on Miss Petersen’s behalf.
 - 30 B.C. Ballard, Barrister and Solicitor was Counsel before the Joint Court in succession to F.E. Wallace and, since 1934, representative in Vila of the Commonwealth Government of Australia.
 - 31 Miss Petersen received a cheque from Vila on 29 August. Her long wait was over.
 - 32 See White Envelope I. *Société Kerr/My* [SK/M] Papers in chronological order. All Catalan correspondence is to be found here.
 - 33 My father received a letter from Jaques de Preville dated 9 July after he had been a month working at Hog Harbour for SK/M. He had high praise for Jules Jocteur who was looking after the place as if it were his personal property. See White Envelope 5. Employees File.
 - 34 See White Envelope 12. East Santo Plantations [ESP] Papers. On 29 Dec 1936 still winding up East Santo Plantations. Agnes Kerr asked Ballard to send her the lease of land at Hog Harbour by B.P. and Co to East Santo Plantations.
 - 35 C. Gustave Adam had been appointed British District Agent on Malekula on 1925. Previous to that he had worked as Clerk in the Registry at the Joint Court and acting Registrar. Born in Mauritius he spoke French and English perfectly. He had also worked temporarily as Translator to the Joint Court. For further information see WPHC 83/1923; WPHC 2935/1923 and WPHC 477/1925.
 - 36 British Authorities had been slowly appointing to Condominium ranks people with no intimate knowledge and little sympathy with the lot of the British settler in New Hebrides. Wallace from personal experience knew exactly what the Kerrs were up against, not so Ballard.
 - 37 See White Envelope No. 1 *Société Kerr/My* Papers for this report dated 4 Dec 1936 from which I have quoted, both in English and French.

Chapter 19 1937: Graham Kerr Gets Himself Deeper in the Mire

On 4 January Maurice Valette wrote to Graham Kerr, not having heard from him since September 1936. He had just returned from a visit to Paris. A meeting of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was held on 18 December and Valette had expected to be present but he was told that the shares were not in the nominative (i.e. appointed by election not by nomination ed.) He had also received a summons to appear before *Tribunal Civil* in Paris to prove exactly their ownership.

Thus there were two cases pending, one against Kerr Bros. Ltd in Vila, which Valette did not yet know about and one against Valette in Paris but both really aimed at Graham Kerr Aupied's sworn enemy.

Aupied impressed on the *Tribunal* the extreme urgency of the summons and that the shares in question belonged to a foreigner, thus raising the emotive sentiment of patriotism. Aupied did not want the shares to be presented in Kerr's name and avoided letting them be placed in Valette's. Kerr Bros did not know officially in Sydney until 24 July 1937 that the shares held in the Marseilles branch of *Comptoir National d'Escompte* were sequestrated. Aupied, wrote Valette, claims to have a case against you and wants to get the shares as a guarantee of payment of a debt you owe to *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

Valette had seen André Joyer and visited a solicitor in Paris, M. Andre Watteau. Valette had asked Kerr for full information on the tree count. What Court had he been summoned to attend? Has an 'expert' been nominated and if so do you know anything about his report? Valette said that at the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* meeting of 22 November 1935, shares could still be presented *au porteur* (by the bearer) and his representation of Graham Kerr could thus not be queried. He had asked that the shares be placed in the name of Kerr but was refused.

Had SFNH wanted to control them, alleging a law suit against you, it could have done it. They rejected it. So much the worst.

In 1935, as Valette did not know, Aupied had not yet worked out his plan of action and the law suit in question was being brought up in Vila until February 1936. Valette expected his case which would include lawyer's fees to come before the *Tribunal* in the next 6 months. He ended his letter

I hope, dear Mr Kerr, that you are in good health, and our company gives you satisfaction. I send you my best wishes for 1937 and renew assurance of my closest attention to guard your interests.¹

Valette knew that the powerful people ranged against Kerr were well-versed in shady legal ploys to gain their ends and on 14 January, having received Kerr's account of the case against him and that he had not attended the trial, gave his ideas on the subject.

Both men lived in very different worlds. France in the 1930s was still recovering from the First World War and the right to govern was fought over by political extremists both to the Right and Left. Many financial scandals involving high-up members of the French parliament had come to light, adding to the tension. Valette would not have realised the full implications of the unique Condominium law of distant New Hebrides however much Kerr tried to enlighten him.² *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* from the very beginning of the Condominium had tried to hinder the working of the Joint

Court by acting as if New Hebrides was a French colony and it continued to do so now. Valette was thus nonplussed that Kerr had not appeared in the French Court to question its competence. He wanted to know whether he had a copy of the *Acte de Vente* drawn up when he sold to Aupied and Joyer in 1927.

Of course he did. Its final clause, as Aupied well knew, made the sale watertight, so the document was hidden from all the lawyers *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* employed to mount the case.

Kerr had discussed the matter with Edward Jacomb when the tree business first came up in 1927 and from his expert knowledge of Condominium law, the latter told him to let Aupied bring the case if he wanted to, as it would have to go before the Joint Court and be judged by the British law of the Defendant, in which case the Kerrs were fully covered.

As far as Kerr Bros Ltd which was legally wound up in 1928 was concerned, Valette, from his knowledge of French law, did not see how Aupied could indict the company of the same name, set up in its place, to serve the now different interests of the Kerr family. Why Graham Kerr received a separate mention was because the family shares had been placed under his name.

Not realising Kerr's close connection with most of the French settlers in the Group, many of them clients of Kerr Bros. Ltd., Valette asked him did he know any of the 'experts' named; people such as Houchard, Ratard and Gané? If so, he advised him to approach them and tell them the ridiculousness of what has been asked of them which was 1937 to count the numbers of trees existing on the plantations in 1927. He, Valette, would refuse to carry out such an order.

My last chapter demonstrates how much support Graham Kerr had from French friends in his business and activities in New Hebrides. *Entente Cordiale* among British and French settlers was alive and well in New Hebrides. In fact Kerr and Guillemot were in the New Hebrides when Paulin Ratard sent off his letter to Kerr Bros. Ltd in Sydney on 24 August 1937 with the names of the fourteen French citizens who refused to join the committee of experts. The 1937 diary mentions many of these people and the friendly treatment and business Kerr and Guillemot were getting from them.

Paris was where the trouble lay. Kerr had to be discredited and Aupied had to win.

Valette continued to believe that Kerr had a strong case but he needed to be aware of the dangers he faced. Valette had done all he possibly could to alert authorities in Paris against Aupied and his band and André Joyer had not be inactive. Joyer told Valette that an extraordinary meeting of Shareholders of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had been called for 26 January 1937, its business being to get rid of the present Board of Management of which Aupied was Director. He had also been told that the Minister for Colonies would give instructions to the incoming Board. But at the same time, it seemed that relations between Aupied and the Minister were close and they would stick together. On 29 January, he received a letter from Kerr:

Re the case against me, I am not worrying greatly, and I do not feel inclined to spend money on representation ... What do they expect to gain? I have no property in New Hebrides, nor in France. Let them come here. I will give them all the fight they want. I was informed confidentially by their own lawyer in Vila [Des Granges] with whom I have friendly relations that they plan, if they get judgement against me, to go for Joyer.³

Kerr added that on 26 January he had received from the Consul-General for France in Sydney, P. Suzor, a summons from the Courts in France:

These people seem to have money to spend on litigation, without much chance of getting it back. I have not called at the Consulate for the precious document.

As far as the new company *Société Kerr/My* was concerned,

... the balance sheet showed very well for the year to 30 June 1936, notwithstanding we had only 6 months of the period under the advantage of being a French Society.

Catalan had not been re-elected to the Board and Jean My took his place as President.

M. Catalan tried to put every obstacle possible in our way. I think he was disappointed we did not place money at his disposal.

On 4 February Valette wrote back telling him about the Extraordinary Meeting held at *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on 26 January. As a result, there was now a completely new *Conseil*. This included *Messageries Maritimes*, Loisy retired Inspector of Colonies; Descremet, Honorary Governor of Colonies; Allard, Director to the Ministry for Colonies; Maillard, Governor of Colonies; Schepler, ditto (sic); Syndicate of French colonists in New Hebrides; *Caledo-Nikel*; and *Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (Ballandes).

Surprisingly, at the demand of some of the shareholders M. Aupied had been asked to act as Consultant to the new Board. Aupied—whose bad management and dishonesty had bankrupted *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*—had been moved sideways from which anonymous position he could direct things just as formerly.

Then they had discussed the balance sheet for 1934. The debt owing by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to the State Budget was raised to 1,700,000F, plus interest. The report of the ‘experts’ in the tree count case against the Kerrs concluded that the Kerrs owed *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* 4,300,000F and *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had also obtained a sequestration order on 900 shares.

Valette was shocked that Graham Kerr did not seem to be worried. He repeated that he should defend himself in court against *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and was surprised that the ‘experts’ came to their damning conclusions after only six days.

Valette wrote that if he had known that Kerr was not going to appear in Court and that a law suit was set up against him, he would have recommended that Kerr no longer present himself or have himself represented at meetings and, above all, not put his shares in his own name. Now *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* could say that there is a lawsuit pending against him before the French Court and not yet judged and have them sequestered.

Valette believed a bad mistake was made in depositing the shares at *Comptoirs National d'Escompte* in Marseilles. Again Valette repeated that Kerr had suffered legal damage from the beginning by not taking seriously the case *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had brought against him in the French Court.

He thought that the new *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was not prejudiced against Kerr and it now remained to see how it could be proved that the shares really belonged to Maurice Valette. If Kerr agreed with what he proposed to do, he was to send a cable with the single word ‘Accord’ and Valette would then go to Paris and consult with his lawyers on the next step to take.

This was a difficult situation as Kerr knew *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had no case against him and that he could not be charged in the French Court because of Condominium law. Valette knew French law and that defaulting made you the ‘guilty’ party who then had to prove yourself innocent. With strong Ministerial support in Paris, Aupied, having gained that point, was preparing to defy Condominium law.⁴

On 23 February Kerr replied that he was astonished at the sequestration of the shares and was prepared to trust Valette in whatever he did to save them. It seemed extraordinary that Aupied and friends could use the *Tribunal* ‘for their own improper ends’. It seemed to him that they ‘have the Government Department [sic] well in hand. What possible good can come out of the new *Conseil* in consultation with Mr Aupied?’

As for the case against him in the French Court in Vila and the ‘experts’ report, none of this fitted into the Anglo-French Convention.⁵

Anyway, it’s quite ridiculous for any experts in the world to be expected to give any accurate indication of the count of trees that were supposed to exist, in the tropics, 10 years ago. [He named the three experts who had refused Houchard, Ratard and Gané.] Then came their opportunity to get others who may be controlled.

He told Valette that at the time of the sale exact tree numbers were not guaranteed. It was up to the buyers to verify the number indicated in the three-month option given them. If the offer was taken up, the only inventories to be taken were to cover moveable stocks and materials.

As mentioned earlier, the offer was taken up before the three-month option ended, and Graham Kerr refused to hand over the properties before payment as stipulated had been carried out. In any case Vibert and Audoin could not agree on the tree count either. One count Vibert put in which was soon afterwards suppressed was almost the same as the one indicated on the original sale document for Turtle Bay. Mate Wulu trees, where the biggest discrepancy occurred had not been guaranteed in any case. 'Would any sane Administrator have allowed the matter to go on for 10 years if there was any merit in it?' No, said Kerr. The whole affair was to divert attention away from them and onto him.

In his reply Valette was sure that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* could not bring a case against the Kerrs in Sydney but, if they won their case in the French Court, anything they owned in French territory was in danger. Kerr had not mentioned the shares as belonging to him in the above letter and Valette told him to be under no illusion that the shares would not be seized if the case went against him. He strongly advised him to be properly represented in front of French justice.

Valette was going to Paris to argue at the *Tribunal Civil* with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* about the shares ownership.

In another letter on 2 March he stressed that Graham Kerr's name must not appear anywhere as the owner of the shares. According to Valette on 1 March, by not attending the trial in the French Court, Kerr had

... put his head in the jaws of a wolf... Luckily the SFNH also made an error in refusing to put the titles in your name immediately which means we may have a chance to save them.

Before the case in Vila came up, Valette had declared that they were his property, as previously arranged with Kerr, so that he could be represented at any hastily-called General Assembly of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and Valette had asked for them to be registered in his own name. 'Feeling that the shares were going to escape them as a result of their refusal to have them placed in your name, SFNH then raised a doubt as to their rightful owner and asked the *Tribunal* for immediate sequestration.'

Valette had seen his lawyer in Paris and worked out a plan which said that he owned the shares on 22 November 1935 and had considered ceding them to Graham Kerr and that it was SFNH itself that refused obliging him to keep them. He might even try before the *Tribunal* to get damages.

I am not hiding it from you, dear Mr Kerr, that as you have, opposing you, veritable financial bandits, it is quite in order that we buy a revolver to defend ourselves.

He stressed that he was 'doing all this for you willingly' but asked for absolute discretion on Kerr's part. Valette told him that Aupied still had complete control of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, despite the new *Conseil*. He has refused to place the shares in the nominative and had set up a Syndicate to sell shares, raising the price as far as 400F. 'What a gang of thieves!'

Meantime Valette was waiting on an immediate reply from Kerr in the way he had indicated so that he could present it to the *Tribunal*.

He told him that he had spoken to Joyer about the trial in Vila which ended in condemnation in your absence:

I think he is very worried... If you can look at things with a smile, you will see that a judgment brought against you will lead immediately to a case against him.

Joyer had testified, with strongly-backed evidence, against Aupied on several occasions before a lethargic Government Committee of Enquiry that was set up after the 1934 *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* balance sheet showed it was bankrupt.

The answer Valette wanted came back on 18 March, thanking him for his keen interest the case. Kerr could not understand why these people could get away with 'their Stavisky schemes'. He too had been busy, but whether Valette, on reading it would consider it 'discrete' is another matter.

On 13 March 1937 Kerr had a letter translated into French to send to the acting French Resident in Vila, Henri Sautot, about the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* case against him. He enclosed a copy of it for Valette to read.

By the same mail I sent copies to the Governor of New Caledonia, and to the President of the French Court in Vila. I am sorry that M. Casimir—the Resident Commissioner—is away on leave. He knows well the proclivities of the gang. He wondered whether it would be possible for Valette to get in touch with him. I am advocating an impartial committee of enquiry to go into the gang's activities and their fantastic claims. I would certainly appear before such a committee.⁶

This hard-hitting letter written by my uncompromising and idealistic father would have repercussions affecting both sides of the Condominium Government. Whatever implications of guilt Kerr's opponents placed on his non-appearance in the French court, it was what he would say before 'such a committee' that had them worried. Probably Kerr might also embarrass the British who were now trying to ease themselves out of the Condominium 'boxing ring' in favour of Australia.

Kerr stressed to Valette that he thought 'the case in the French Court in Vila ... is entirely illegal' and asked the latter if he had a reliable legal representative who could look up the terms of the Anglo-French Convention of 1906 governing disputes between different nationalities in the New Hebrides Condominium.⁷ As regards *Société Kerr/My* he had taken the precaution of making his wife the owner of 900 shares in that company against his holding of 20 shares.

Despite Kerr's explanation, Valette still considered it a great mistake that he had not defended himself in the French Court in Vila. He could have pleaded the incompetence of the court to judge and no doubt would have won his point. On 30 March, Valette wrote:

Consequently the Court adopts the statements of the adversary in spite of all the arguments in your favour.

Who will present these facts to the Court? Tell them that the Kerr Bros. Ltd they have indicted was liquidated 10 years ago? Who will tell them that you were in no way responsible for the trees on the Petersen property? Who will tell them that it is impossible to count the numbers of trees 10 years ago? Who will tell them that the first experts refused the task for that very reason? Who will tell them that the case is not within the jurisdiction of the French Court because of the Anglo French Convention?⁸

No-one will tell them and the Court will automatically judge as the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* wishes. If Kerr did not lay the facts before the Court no one would, and despite the fact you are right, the judgement will go against you.

But there was more involved because Kerr would never have appeared in the court. He always acted through lawyers. And what he wanted was one like Edward Jacomb, versed in both British and French law, someone who had not been popular with British or French authorities during his sojourn in the Group because he was a tenacious stirrer who pointed out—time and time again—French transgressions in other cases. In this way Jacomb placed a strain on the always delicate relations between the two sides of the Condominium Government.

Kerr believed it was up to the British judge to the Joint Court to have protested when the proclamation was first made in February 1936, but the judge was absent from Vila at that time, and the Joint Court was not sitting. This was probably the reason the French chose to bring the case at that time.⁹

The policy of British authorities such as the Colonial Office in England was to turn a blind eye in order to keep the Condominium ship in trim. What would be the British Judge's reaction when this matter did come to his attention? And what of Sir George Joy, the British Resident Commissioner, did

he have anything to say? The reactions of B.C. Ballard the only British lawyer in Vila, as well as being Commonwealth Representative to the Australian Government, will be dealt with later.

In his next letter Valette himself pointed out that Kerr should immediately approach British authorities in Vila who could then raise the matter with the French Government itself. If Kerr was not present to raise the question of competence, an 'energetic demand from your authorities could raise the matter as a violation of the Anglo-French Agreement'. He was right, but would British authorities take up the challenge?

Valette was truly scandalised at what the Aupied party were doing and pointed out that under all circumstances Kerr must avoid condemnation in court which would lead to more work and legal fees. In another letter dated 16 April, he suggested that withdrawals to the credit of Kerr Bros. Ltd with its agent Julliens at Marseilles should be made large enough so that Kerr could become a debtor to the amount of about 30,000F. This was necessary because if the case against him in the French Court resulted in condemnation, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would claim the money. Valette's Paris barrister was sure that Kerr must present himself before the Court in order to oppose the question of competence. Kerr only needed to say that he refused to plead his case before a Court not competent to hear it.

Concerning the Founders' Shares if they could be sold, and the price was now 100F, would Kerr like him to go ahead? 'Given what we know of this Society, we should not perhaps miss the opportunity.' And he included with this letter the plea his lawyer was putting before the *Tribunal Civil* for the 'bearer' shares to be put in his own name.

Taking heed of Valette's warning that he must appear in court Kerr who was in Sydney told Valette on 16 April that he was sending a radio to the British solicitor, Mr Ballard as follows:

Take proceedings to enter emphatic protest, through British authorities [of] any violation [of] Anglo-French Convention by French Tribunal reported to be dealing with action against me. [It] would be very dangerous precedent if Convention [was] flouted. [I] shall proceed to Vila if required. My Representative, Mr Guillemot, will see you.

Unfortunately there was no possibility of mail to Vila for over a month as *Morinda* had just left and *Pierre Loti* was on its way to Indo-China. So back-up documents could not be forwarded.

After sending off the letter to Valette Kerr received a letter from the Consul-General for France telling him that he had received a summons from the Courts in Paris. This had been sent to the address in Clarence St. which Kerr Bros had left in 1935. Kerr had heard nothing about the case against him in the French Court in Vila since returning to Sydney in December and wanted the advice of Valette's solicitors as to whether he should collect the summons.

By 30 April he still had no news from Vila. Maybe when *Morinda* arrived in the next week he would have news from Mr Ballard and M. Guillemot. On 14 May he told Valette he was

... in the thick of instructing our solicitors here in this matter. They will get the best opinion here as to the legal rights in the matter. Full instructions will be sent to Vila by next mail and I shall follow on when necessary.

He gave Valette a full account of what had happened since 1927, starting from receiving Power of Attorney from Kerr Bros. Ltd to give Charles Revel in Paris an option over certain properties for which he gave indications of areas planted etc. Revel passed on the option to Aupied and Joyer who took it up and set up *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 1927 with Kerr Bros. Ltd being represented on the *Conseil*.

Unfortunately I was green enough and had such faith in the thing that we took shares for 1,250,000F. [At the time 125F was one pound sterling] ... Sufficient time was given for complete examination of the properties.

Kerr mentioned that he believed a very favourable report was given by Fernand Largeau.

To suit their own purposes Messrs Aupied and Joyer rushed through the constitution of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*; it was said, on account of a new company law coming in. After first payment had been made to us ... Aupied thought it time to raise some quibble and raked up the question of the count of trees. We never at any time recognised that we had to establish any count of immovable things. Naturally an inventory of moveable things such as stock in store, working-plant, livestock etc had to be made. I insisted on complete payment being made before handing over the properties. [This was done on Edward Jacomb's advice.]

Such payment was made, inventories made of all moveable things, stock in store was paid for and all was apparently complete. Nothing further was done by ... Aupied until after the fusion of different companies [in July 1930] which I had been advocating for some time, and, after my visit to Paris in 1932, when, as a member of the *Conseil*, I severely criticised the methods of Paris Administration. Now ... Aupied thought of the old matter of the count of trees to get me off the *Conseil*...

In the sale to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* I had acted under Power of Attorney from Kerr Bros. Ltd and when *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* had transfers ready for signature, it was found that my Power of Attorney had expired so *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* [represented by Audoin] would not accept and refused final payment.

New transfers were prepared by our solicitor in Vila—Mr Wallace—and these were executed under the seal of the Company at Sydney and signed by Audoin for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in the British Residence on 11 October 1928.

Wallace had signed for Graham Kerr and asked that the old 28 August 1928 transfer now be destroyed or handed to the Kerrs for destruction. *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in its future accusations never mentioned the October document, which, like the 28 August one, contained no mention of trees.

Kerr concluded that he thought his enemies had been building their case on his non-appearance in court.

Defunct Kerr Bros. Ltd cannot appear, but I am not defunct... the thing is so ridiculous that I have been lulled into letting them go ahead. However that is past.

The 'defunct' Kerr Bros. Ltd had gone into legal liquidation in November 1928 as being no longer relevant and a new one of the same name set up to cover the new conditions.

With respect to the shares, Valette in Paris was trying to have his own case before the *Tribunal Civil* arranged for September while he awaited the result of the trial in Vila. He had been looking at the sale of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shares. Aupied and his friends were manoeuvring the stock market to control it and get rid of their shares at the best possible price to themselves while blocking the sale of others. Kerr must send him an order on *Comptoir National d'Escompte* in Sydney, bankers to *Société Kerr/My*, to give him permission to get to the shares now held in *Comptoir National d'Escompte* in Marseilles for *Société Kerr/My* as a guarantee for any overdraft. Then maybe Valette could sell a few here and there.

In a letter, dated 28 May, Valette told Kerr that, from information he had received, it appeared that at the Imperial Conference in London, British rights in the New Hebrides had been transferred to Australia and it seemed to him that, as an Australian citizen, it would be good for Kerr. Little did he know.

On 27 November 1937 the *Sydney Morning Herald* published an editorial and a letter by Reverend Maurice Frater dealing with the transfer of British rights much of which Graham Kerr would have queried.¹⁰

In the editorial, the strategic importance of the Group to Australia was stressed despite the fact that the New Hebrides lay on the far side of New Caledonia. It instanced the 'important, historic, eco-

conomic and cultural ties' that Australia had with the Group. What was meant by historic was the visit of Captain Cook to the New Hebrides and by cultural was meant strong support for the New Hebrides Mission in its ongoing efforts to change the culture of the Indigenous people. What was meant by 'economic' contained a number of ironies because, despite the fact that New Hebrides bought most of its supplies from Australia, the Australian Government always refused to lower tariffs for incoming products from the islands. Lowering tariffs ran counter to the White Australia Policy as did Australia's refusal to agree to British subjects being allowed foreign labour of colour to run their plantations.

There was a suggestion in the editorial that the islands were of no great value to France and they might be prepared to transfer their interest. But, on the contrary, what was going on in the Group at this time was a desperate grab by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* for as many properties as possible. Even if this was only to sell them to the profit of a set of stockbroking thieves in Paris with powerful French Government participation and before they had gone before the Joint Court for adjudication as to actual property ownership.

The editorial went into the business of the considerable capital invested in the New Hebrides by the New Hebrides Mission. It did not mention that the main reason for the Mission being there was to stop the French from annexing.

The editorial also dealt with the Agreement of 1878 when both countries agreed not to annex. This Agreement resulted in much frustration for France, but was a real political coup for Britain. Now Britain could not be coerced into annexing a Group she did not want, however much the New Hebrides Mission and its Australian supporters protested which they did, loud and long.

The 1886 French invasion of New Hebrides and its repulsion as given in the editorial appeared to redound to Australia's credit which was far-fetched. What was true was that 'although exercising no political authority, Australia has played a leading part in the economic and cultural development of the New Hebrides', but not in the way the editorial tried to convey; as Frater's article points out.

Ever since it was announced that there was a possibility of England withdrawing from the New Hebrides and delegating to Australia her share in the Condominium, there has been an air of tension and uncertainty in the Group ... Public opinion is pretty well divided ... and a considerable section of even British settlers would favour sole and undivided French rule rather than a partnership with Australia. This is due to the policy of drift and intransigence which has so long marred the Commonwealth's relations with the islands.¹¹

As a supporter of the New Hebrides Mission, Reverend Frater said 'the interests of the native race are paramount' to the mission'. But as I have already indicated, at this time the 'power' component behind such interest and the 'benefits' accruing to the Indigenous people were being openly questioned.

Frater wrote that what was being carried out at that time in Papua New Guinea under mandate to Australia,

... made the missions confident that similar benefits would accrue to the New Hebrides under Joint control.

He wrote of England's reluctance to promote the welfare of the native race or encourage British colonisation:

Indeed the wonder is that she should have remained so long.

Residents of the islands are not surprised that Britain... should desire to retire from the joint control of a remote group of inlands in which she has no direct commercial or strategic interest... Long before the question of transfer of partnership was raised, it had become recognised that the real partners in the Condominium were not France and Britain but France and Australia, with Great Britain playing the role of arbiter.

What Frater did not say was that France took strong exception to the many insulting comments that had issued from Australia through the years. France did not regard Australia as part of the Anglo-French Agreement. Also Australia did not want New Hebrides with its non-white population. Nor did Australia want the expense and responsibility involved in its administration; nor to help the British planters. 'Arbiter', to Australia meant 'banker'. Although Australia was now a Commonwealth, Britain (otherwise Mother England) should bear the cost and keep the French in their place.

I have gone into this at length to indicate the futility of Valette's hope that a change in Condominium partnership would help Kerr's case. Kerr would not have placed much faith in help from Australia. I believe that the uncertainty pervading the British part of the Condominium Administration at this crucial time worked to Kerr's disadvantage preventing him from getting the help from Britain he so badly needed and the help he, so undiplomatically, tried to get for himself by approaching French Authorities instead.

Sautot had replied to Kerr on 29 April, telling he could not intervene.¹² He had consulted the French High Commissioner in Noumea. The Chief of the Judicial Service there said that 'the contract of sale having taken place between you and *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* under French law, the French Court was solely competent to judge'. This was not the case and the relevant document, signed under British law in the British Residence on 11 October 1928, was conveniently disregarded.

On 15 June Kerr told Valette that he had instructed *Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris* to hold all the Kerr shares at Valette's disposal.

Although the state of SFNH looks very hopeless, there may a turn of the wheel against the 'exploiters'.

Graham Kerr never lost faith in the potential that lay behind the French plantations owned by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* under proper management, which was what Aupied was seeking to impede. On 6 July 1937, Kerr told Valette that he was going to New Hebrides via Noumea to Consult Maître Coursin about the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* case. He said the 'French solicitor at Vila is employed by the other side'. This was Des Granges as there was no other French lawyer in Vila.

Regarding *Société Kerr/My*, while the fluctuations taking place in the value of the franc did not alter property values it did affect buying and selling. Henri Guillemot had taken charge of *Société Kerr/My's* Noumea office and during his recent visit to the New Hebrides 'he prevailed on *Cie Cotonnière* [Caillard], to make a shipment of copra to you'. Caillard was also shipping 50 tons through Ballandes. If the return from the Julliens was favourable, 'we shall get the whole output'. What would Raoul-Duval, Aupied's partner at Le Havre and the Julliens' rival, have to say about that? Graham Kerr brought up the idea of 'a reliable French man for Sydney ... He must be French. The psychology of a French man is necessary'.¹³

While Kerr was away in the islands, the Manager of *Comptoir National d'Escompte* in Sydney sent a letter to Kerr Bros Office on 24 July from its Paris headquarters saying that on 17 December 1936 the President of the *Tribunal Civil de Paris* had appointed M. Kastler to sequester the 899 'bearer' *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shares held in the Marseilles branch by Messrs Th. and Ed. Jullien for conversion to the nominative in the name of M. Valette and it was to Valette they would have to apply for information. Aupied's grip was tightening and the fate of the shares now lay with Valette and his law suit with the *Tribunal Civil*.

Graham Kerr's next letter to Valette written from Hog Harbour on 30 August showed that persecution was really getting to him—'It is quite true, and no doubt it would give [Aupied] considerable satisfaction to know it, that he is causing me much trouble'—Kerr was at a loss to know how to counter such 'Stavisky-like tactics'.

In the process at Vila, these people have had matters mostly their own way, as we did not appear until late. There is only one French *Avocat* in Vila [Des Granges], and he is their representative, and when the British Barrister [B.C. Ballard], appeared for us to make opposition to the judgment, he was brushed aside.

With Jacomb's knowledge of both British and French law there would have been no chance of brushing him aside however embarrassing it might have been to British authorities. But he was long gone from the Group and was practicing medicine not law. Ballard had a law degree from Sydney and maybe the effort of reading and assimilating the many French documents Kerr gave him was too much. A hearing of the case was to come up on 9 November. Kerr wrote

I am in consultation with Maitre Marcel Coursin of Noumea and with his father who was French *Avocat* at Vila previously. We have decided to bring the case to Noumea on appeal... At Noumea we shall have a better class of judges... the French Judge at Vila proved himself as simply an advocate for the other side.

He told Valette that he had been attacked by all sides in his absence and a great thing made in court of his presumption in sending the 13 March 1937 letter, referred to earlier, to Henri Sautot the French Resident Commissioner.

I have a perfect right to do this as the French government are co-shareholders with ourselves in the SFNH.

He told Valette that he feared the case would drag on for a long time.

Where was the British Judge? Probably aghast at the implication behind what Graham Kerr had told Sautot. The letter would probably not have drawn such venom if presented to the Court by British Authorities instead of by a private British subject. But it would have placed these British Authorities in the awkward position of having to protect a British planter from the outcome of his dealings the French Government; the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.

What Merton King, Smith-Rewse and Sir C. Rodwell had warned the Colonial Office would happen if they did not allow British settlers the same concessions as the French, had happened—British planters would sell out to French companies or join them, or both. Here, before them, was an extreme case of what could result.

Probably the very worst thing Kerr did was to agree to the case being withdrawn to Noumea because now the British Judge had an excuse for turning a blind eye and not giving Ballard the necessary support. But at the same time, I believe, Kerr should never have been put in the position of having to decide. That job was for the British Judge.

At least the news from Hog Harbour was good:

Mr Jocteur is a very good man for the plantation and affairs ... progressing as well as can be expected. Unfortunately, production is down badly through the blow [hurricane] in 1936 [and the bad condition its previous British management had brought about]. No outside labour was permitted [then]. Now the plantation has Tonkinese labour, as well as some native.

On 30 September Valette told Kerr that he had been advised that the Court in Vila had condemned Kerr because he had not appeared. He was anxious to find out what 9 November would bring. With respect to the shares, Valette warned him that he must stick to the fact for the moment that he had ceded them to Valette. He expected his own case before the *Tribunal Civil* to come off in December. If Kerr won his appeal on 9 November, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would also be obliged to abandon its case before the *Tribunal Civil* in Paris, but in the meantime the sequestration order acted against both himself and the Kerrs.

From perusal of documents in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris in 1983 I found out just how busy Vibert and Aupied were that year working out how to bring their case against the Kerrs to a successful conclusion. On 28 January 1937, Des Granges their lawyer in Vila, who knew the Kerrs had no case to answer, began to work on the legal aspects of the case. This was after finding that the Kerrs were getting T.C. Ballard and Marcel Coursin of Noumea to represent them.¹⁴

Des Granges warned Vibert that they would no doubt bring up: (1) the absence of reservations regarding trees in the final settlement of 28 August 1928. He did not mention the amended settlement signed at the British Residence by Audoin for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on 11 October 1928, which did not mention trees; and (2) the provisions of Article 1622 of the French Civil Code which said that reduction of price, or cancelling of the contract to buy on the part of the buyer, must be done within a year of the day of signing of the contract on pain of disqualification.

He emphasised that, as the option was taken up before the three months stipulated had expired and before the tree shortages were found, the day the option was signed, March 23, 1927, was the day the contract was finalised. By drawing attention to the importance of these vital documents Des Granges could not have done the Kerrs a worse disservice. Des Granges' own position versus the French government was more important to him.

Because of this, the relevant documents that proved what Des Granges had said would be hidden by Aupied from Professor Hamel of the Law Faculty of the Sorbonne when he was called upon for advice, so would the final clause of the *Acte de Vente* which read that the buyers of the properties ceded take them in the state they are found on entering into possession, dated 23 March 1927.

Aupied was now also working to wreck *Société Kerr/My* and confiscate any property belonging to the Kerrs. Des Granges told Aupied in 19 March that Mr G.L.S. Kerr only owns a small piece of land worth some thousands of francs¹⁵ and the present Kerr Bros. Ltd owns nothing.¹⁶

From letters dated 27 April and 3 May it looked as if the sale of East Santo Plantations, a company registered in Sydney to *Société Kerr/My* was being considered as an alienation of the rights of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.¹⁷ The people in Paris thought the setting up of *Société Kerr/My* could be made to appear 'fraudulent' in the coming trial. 'These means of bringing pressure to bear are often effective'. And if, by 'effective', they meant making their opponent lose his cool they were right.

The case against Kerr Bros and Graham Kerr separately came off in the French Court on 10 June. Kerr was not present but represented by Mr Ballard. On 20 June 1937 Vibert told Aupied that the Kerr family were again condemned to pay the amount determined by the 'expert' tree counters on 14 December 1936, namely 4,264,890 francs 93 centimes, plus costs, with a special fine levied on G. L.S. Kerr 'because of his incorrect actions which were severely criticised by the court'.¹⁸

Even if there was an appeal, wrote Vibert, G.L.S. Kerr would remain liable for the extra costs mentioned, and the money forwarded by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris to set up the case, would have to be reimbursed by him. The Judge of the French Court was offended that Mr Kerr, doubting the impartiality as well as the competence of the French Court, had complained to the French High Commissioner.

Des Granges was told that distraint (seizure) orders were to be put out immediately on any property owned by the Kerrs in New Hebrides, of which he had told Paris they had none, as well as in Australia. As far as Australia was concerned, as the case was on appeal, he told them such an action was not open to him.

Regarding the team of 'experts' to find out the number of trees at Turtle Bay in 1927, Vibert wrote that Colardeau, who left the Group before he could attest to the findings, and Emile Ohlen, at present in France, intended suing Graham Kerr for defamation. I have no record that they ever did. Knowing my father he would not have pulled any punches in telling them to their faces exactly what he thought of them. I do have copies of the 12 letters of other French settlers who took Kerr's side and refused to join the team of experts. Vibert must have known exactly who they were when they returned the requests to him but, as always, he was very selective in his use of material.

Vibert had his spies out in force but they did not know everything. On 26 August Vibert told Aupied about a trip through the Group made by Henri Guillemot employed by the Kerrs in which he circulated a memo, of which Vibert forwarded a copy, the aim of which was to underrate the report of the three 'experts' he had finally been able to gather.¹⁹

Their effort, from what I have been told, will only have little success as most of the settlers refuse to sign to aid an Englishman against a French one.

This was just not true. As I illustrated earlier in the Group there was real *entente* between the settlers of the two Condominium nations. In Paris it was different and, at this very disturbed time in Europe—

with the Spanish Civil War raging, Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, Hitler's increasing threat and that of Stalin further to the East—relations between England and France were strained.

What raised Vibert's ire was that Guillemot during his visit was telling French clients the advantages of dealing with the Julliens in Marseilles, instead of being ripped off by Raoul-Duval of Le Havre, and doing it through *Société Kerr/My*. This was the real threat to the Aupied group and must be nipped in the bud. The ridiculous tree count was the only way to get started.

On 2 October *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* in Paris received a copy of the judgment of 10 June 1937 in which Mr Ballard represented the Kerrs and demanded the withdrawal of default and the setting aside of the conclusions.²⁰ Des Granges opposed the demand on the grounds that twice already default had been pronounced. As the Kerrs did not have anyone appearing for them at the first hearing on 9 July 1936, default was again given.

The fact of non-appearance at the first trial seemed to be the crux of the matter and everything followed from that. Judgment was based on a so-called Deed of Sale dated 24 April 1928 and another on 28 August 1928. The first date was when Vibert and Audoin tried to force D.H. Kerr to sign a contradictory tree count which would have cancelled the last clause of the original deed of sale of 7 February 1927, taken up on 25 March 1927. This they well knew meant that they had no case against the Kerrs.

In the future the fact of default would become the whole French case against Graham Kerr. He would bring up over and over again documentary evidence of his innocence and, although their lawyers would be uneasy at what they saw there, justice would not prevail.

Graham Kerr came in for particularly vicious mention. He, personally, was to bear special costs because he, in place of appearing to answer a summons, or having himself represented before the French court at Vila, had addressed himself to the highest French administrative official in the Colony in a letter which was to be annexed to the present judgment.²¹ By sending the letter Graham Kerr had committed 'an act of malice'.

It was never revealed in any document concerning this case that Aupied had himself been condemned for wrong-doing in Paris and removed from his post as Director of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. In France this was well known, but not so in New Caledonia and New Hebrides. Here Aupied was represented as completely innocent and one whose good name was being maliciously taken from him by Kerr.

Who exactly was Aupied's powerful supporter in the French Parliament would always remain an unanswered question, but Pierre Laval was the name usually given.

On 25 November the lawyer looking after the case for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris told Aupied that he had seen Professor Hamel and given him some of the papers concerning the case.²² He felt he needed to ask Hamel more, for example how to deal with the Kerr Bros. Ltd that went into liquidation in November 1928 and the new one set up at the same time. Also on the question of the competence of the French court to try Kerr. Did Aupied think that the whole dossier should be sent to the Professor? The answer was no, but not in so many words. Aupied was far too astute for that. Many years would go by before the whole dossier would come to light. As a result a telegram from *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would be received by Des Granges in Vila on 20 January 1938 saying that Professor Hamel considered it possible not only to sue the Kerrs personally but also to sue the former Kerr Bros. Ltd and the new one and even *Société Kerr/My*. Graham Kerr certainly had his head in the wolf's mouth.

From early 1937, heeding Valette's advice, Kerr was in touch with B.C. Ballard, the only British lawyer in Vila, about land at Hog Harbour held under lease from Burns Philp, a condition of the lease being that the land could not be sold to a Frenchman.

Ballard had already been contacted by Des Granges for a consultation about the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* dispute. It had not yet come off and Ballard wrote:

Had I already advised him I should probably not have been able to act for you, but in the circumstances, if you definitely want me to represent you I shall put him off.²³

On 20 January 1937 Kerr told Ballard that he was awaiting news from Paris before he gave him instructions as how to act for him. The Burns Philp lease to East Santo Plantations, now in liquidation, was to be conveyed to D.H. Kerr and lodged at the Joint Court.

On 30 April Ballard reported receiving a radio message from Graham Kerr instructing him to protest against any violation of the Protocol by the French Tribunal. He had gone immediately to the court 'to ascertain what action was afoot'. He was told that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had begun action 'against Kerr Bros. Ltd., Assembly Hall Building, 1 Jamison St. Sydney and yourself, as Defendants, some months ago'.

A judgement had been pronounced directing an enquiry by experts into the number of trees on the plantations sold and this 'expertise' has been held and the report was just to hand.

The 'voluminous documents', of which he was obliged to get copies from the Court, had just arrived but he had not had time to study them.

The first matter to consider he said was jurisdiction. Ballard had concluded that the basis of the contract between Graham Kerr and the French being 'written in French, entered into in France and having nothing English about it—at least that is how it appears to me on the information at my disposal, it follows that the French court is a proper tribunal to consider the matter'. On his present information 'there is nothing which I can use as a basis of any protest'. The present Kerr Bros. Ltd has a perfect defence however, as it was not in existence when the action started.

Graham Kerr as the agent of Kerr Bros and in his own name needed to defend the action. Ballard had discussed the matter with Henri Guillemot during his visit to the Group and was surprised that Kerr had not come to see him when he was in Vila in late 1936.

Although Guillemot told Ballard that the news was not then official, Ballard considered that 'the French court would not have given its judgment unless it had been satisfied that service had been properly effected according to its own law'. Des Granges had also told him that the summons had been delivered both to Santo and Sydney and that he himself 'had read over the summons with you'. On his present knowledge Ballard thought it better to let the case go on as an undefended one; then 'opposition' should be lodged and the whole matter fought out properly.

Guillemot had told him that a 'substantial defence' existed and Ballard thought that in any case the 'staleness of the claim alone renders it very suspect'. Unlike Valette and the legal opinion he had obtained, Ballard thought it not in Graham Kerr's best interests to intervene at the present time. The French Court will make its pronouncement in May and a month later, judgment will be pronounced. 'Then the Plaintiff [SFNH] has to pay a large sum to have it registered, and the "opposition" should be lodged'. Ballard needed a copy of the Sale Contract. 'At present... I know very little about the whole matter, so I am looking to you for enlightenment'.

On 26 May Kerr told Ballard that he had seen his Sydney lawyers Perkins, Stevenson & Co who would be sending him a letter expressing their point of view. A copy was also to be sent to his Noumea lawyer, Marcel Coursin. He himself would bring all relevant documents to Vila when he came and he asked Ballard to tell him when to come. He wondered if Ballard had Wallace's legal documents on the case.

Wallace had been Kerr Bros. lawyer in Vila when the final sale documents to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* went through in 1928. In particular the one of 11 October 1928 signed at the British Residence by Audoin for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, to replace the one of 28 August repudiated by both *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and Graham Kerr, which Wallace had told the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* should be destroyed. This document was absolutely vital.

The letter from Perkins Stevenson was written on 26 May and gave their version of the case and took a different approach:

Apparently no question of a claim for compensation or damages was raised between 13 June 1927 and the end of 1932, although Mr Kerr was a member of the Board of the respective Companies [*Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*] and was consulted and frequently corresponded with the Companies and their Managing Directors.

On 11 July 1933 the SFNH issued summonses in the French Courts in Paris against members of the Kerr family and Kerr Bros. Ltd claiming 3 million francs in damages. We think it is of special interest that in this summons no reference was made to the written option ... but refers to an alleged verbal option of February 1927.²⁴

The written option with its vital final clause on 9 February 1927 had been deliberately buried away with those documents not to be used. No 'verbal' option was ever given.²⁵

The above summons were received in Sydney through the French Consul. No steps were taken in regard thereto by the Company or the members of the Kerr family and it not known whether any further proceedings were taken.

This could explain why the Kerrs regarded the later summons as a kind of 'bad joke' and to be disregarded.

Perkins Stevenson pointed out to Ballard that the Kerr Bros. Ltd summoned in the latest proceedings was not the one referred to in the summons:

As regards jurisdiction, we note what you have to say in your letter to Mr Kerr with regard to the French court being the proper tribunal to consider the matter but, on the other hand, only the slightest information was before you, and it may be that after consideration of certain facts, your conclusions will be different.

Perkins Stevenson disagreed with Ballard that the case was wholly French:

The contract was concluded in the New Hebrides both by the giving of possession of the property to the Purchaser and the transfer in the New Hebrides of the titles after payment of all purchase money, the actual transfers being, we understand, drawn up by an English lawyer [Wallace] in the English language and being executed in Sydney under the Common Seal of the company [and signed by Audoin for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in the British Residency 11 October 1928].

They considered that there were many elements of the contract which

... according to Article 20 [of the Protocol of 1914] make the transaction one in which the French Court would not have jurisdiction ... furthermore ... the claim for damages is based on the numbers of trees on the plantation. Trees we imagine can only be regarded as in the nature of fixtures on the land, and if the title to the land is English, then it appears to us that the French Court does not have jurisdiction in the matter.

If however the French Court does have jurisdiction, they could not access any of the Kerr possessions in Australia and, as regards shares held by Kerr Bros. in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, they had been transferred to a third party [Valette] but they have been sequestrated by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which refuses to give them up.

We are at a loss to understand under what authority or right it claims to be entitled to withhold such scrip. [This was Valette's opinion exactly.]

As regards defence of the case, Charles Revel, with whom original arrangements were made to sell the plantations, he

... obtained an independent report on the property, and although Mr Kerr did not see the report, no doubt it will be possible to prove that such a report was obtained.²⁶

Perkins Stevenson thought that under the three months option the purchasers had sufficient time to verify what they were buying.

If they did not avail themselves of the full extent of that time that was their responsibility.

Apparently after exercising the option they received a report which was considered adverse in some way, and raised some question at the time, probably as to the number of trees, but they appear to have waived any such objection by payment of the balance of purchase money and acceptance of the property and the title thereto....

... in instituting proceedings in Paris the written option was disregarded altogether and the summons refers to a verbal option.

This is another reference to the final clause of the original Deed of Sale of 7 February 1927 which needed to be hidden at all costs as it proved that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had no case.

The two different Kerr Bros Ltd were mentioned once again, the old one 'no longer capable of suing or being sued':

As regards Mr G.L.S. Kerr, it appears to be quite clear ... that the Purchasers were fully aware that Mr Kerr was not a principal in the matter... merely an agent of the Vendor... The title to the property stood in the company's name and the final transfer was executed by the Company under its Common Seal, the Company receiving the whole of the purchase money. We cannot see that ... Mr Kerr gave the Purchaser the slightest indication that he was a principal ... or acting in any capacity other than that of agent for the Vendor company.

The 'staleness of the claim', waiting 10 years to bring it, seemed to them ridiculous and the:

Purchasing Company's own production figures, after acquiring the property, disclose that in fact that production could not have been obtained had there not been the stated number of trees on the property at the time.

The plaintiff Company is subject to influence of the French Government and from what Mr Kerr tells us it would appear that the whole proceedings have been conceived more as a cloak to cover up maladministration by those responsible ... than as a genuine claim for damage, which makes it no less important to oppose the proceedings.

A meeting with Jules de Leener was mentioned. Graham Kerr was to hand Ballard conclusions reached by the de Leener when he reached Vila. De Leener, who now lived in Sydney and was on friendly terms with Graham Kerr, knew the Joint Court having in 1922–1923 acted as Registrar as well as Public Prosecutor. Both Merton King and Sir Charles Rodwell, Western Pacific High Commissioner at that time, wanted him to become permanent Registrar but he did not 'stand well with the French'.²⁷

A copy of the Perkins Stevenson letter was to go to Maître Coursin in Noumea and Graham Kerr would take down his own huge dossier of relevant information to Ballard in Vila when he went.

On receiving this letter Ballard wrote on 8 June: 'At the next sitting of the court I shall appear on the Defendant's behalf, and ask for an adjournment to enable us to prepare our case'. Kerr's presence would not be required for about two months and then only if he could produce 'contra expertise' against the findings of the three French (tree count) 'experts'. This is precisely what Kerr in his letter to the French Resident said he was prepared to produce in person.²⁸

Ballard ended his letter asking for a cheque for 50 pounds for disbursements. This marks the beginning of the ruinous legal expenses incurred by the work of many different lawyers both in New Hebrides, New Caledonia and France in fighting for the Kerr family during the long years this iniquitous case ran its course.

In his reply on 8 June, to the letter sent him by Perkins Stevenson, Ballard thought the crux of the matter lay in whether the finalisation of the Deed of Sale was the French one of 28 August 1928 or the amended one signed in the British Residence on 11 October 1928. If the first it was a purely French contract, Kerr having given his place of domicile as Emile My's house in Paris during the original sale in 1927.

I think it is hard to say that the French Court is wrong in assuming jurisdiction and that Mr Kerr is doing the right thing in defending the action. It is true that he elected domicile in Paris in his option, but perhaps a trial here would be better than in France.

Ballard said that he did not have enough material to prepare a full defence and he needed further instruction before 8 July.

A trial in Paris was the last thing *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, Aupied and his Government backers would have wanted. Aupied was already discredited there and Kerr, also with influential Government backing provided through the Julliens and Valette, would have certainly pulled no punches in adding to that discredit at such a trial. No, Aupied's option was to hold the trial far away in Vila or better, Noumea, where Aupied and his backers were not known.

Ballard informed Kerr on 23 June 1937 that he had attended the last sitting of the French court regarding the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* case, asking permission to appear before judgment was delivered, but the application was disallowed.

One of the things that got under the French Judge's skin was the letter Graham Kerr addressed to him personally, as well as the French Resident Commissioner and the French High Commissioner on 13 March 1937. This was '*un acte de malice*' and by so doing Mr Kerr had committed a grave fault. Kerr Bros. Ltd was condemned to pay 4,264,890 F and 93 centimes and G.L.S. Kerr, personally, to pay for the registration of the present judgment, plus damages.

Ballard had ascertained that 'the French deed of transfer [28 August 1928] is the only one lodged in the Joint Court: apparently the later English one [11 October 1928] was never used'.²⁹

As I have said, all the vital documents which disproved their findings were well-hidden in Paris. Graham Kerr had his copies which I now hold (in the National Library of Australia archives). The case—though the various appeals and rising legal costs were never to get past the appeal stage—was directed from Paris. *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* lawyers were paid for by the French government using money meant for the administration of the French part of the Condominium Government. This money, supposedly, was to be reimbursed by Kerr in costs and damages. He took violent exception to all this. Perhaps, if he had been less irate, it would have been better for his cause. He told Ballard on 7 July;

This thing is all a blind to cover up the tracks of a gentleman in Paris. I maintain that I am not properly before the French court, notwithstanding the violent language of the person in charge of that court. I have no summons to the French court in Vila. Is this man an advocate or judge? I shall go on as soon as you require my presence at Vila. They cannot get away with it.

And on 22 July he sent Ballard a detailed account of the case from its beginnings. All the legal papers concerning the setting up of the present Kerr Bros. Ltd and liquidation of the former one were sent to Maître Coursin in Noumea. No stone was left unturned by Graham Kerr to set things straight. It is difficult to see what else he could have done, except to keep his cool.

On 14 October Ballard was prepared to argue the matter in the French court but the Judge said he wanted time to look into the matter, and adjourned the case for another month. Ballard's letter dated 3 November said

Some little time after, he, [the French Judge], was talking about the case in the [Joint Court] Registry, and I happened to be there, and he was of the opinion that he had no

jurisdiction, and that the British court was the proper court. Of course, he has given no judgment in the matter, and his opinion may well vary before the next hearing. In fact I was surprised to hear him discuss quite freely a matter that was sub judice.

Surely then the British Judge and the President of the Joint Court would also have heard.

Thinking he had the French Judge on his side Ballard thought it should be brought out that *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* had refused to pay out the remaining money after the settlement of 28 August 1928 until they saw the one signed on 11 October in the British Residence. Ballard noted that:

Knowing his present attitude, I think that if he is shown some 'foreign' element in the case he will certainly decide that he has no jurisdiction.

He thought the case should be blocked in the French court.

It would be almost impossible for the other side to succeed in ... the English Court—the delay is more than six years [and] could only be surmounted by proof of fraud, which as far as I can see would be impossible.

He told Kerr that the next hearing date was 11 November—'Armistice Day, and a holiday [and the hearing], may be postponed a little while' and it was. From a letter written by Kerr to Ballard on 21 December it seemed the next hearing was coming up on 13 January 1938.

Mr. Des Granges may think he is having a great joke; it is a very poor one, and certainly sharp practice. I am a married man with a large family to bring up, and I cannot afford to spend money for the amusement of Des Granges and the 'crooks' behind him. Can we make these people pay for their amusement?

He had earlier considered Des Granges to be a friend. 'I shall be leaving [Sydney] for New Hebrides by the *Pierre Loti* on 13 January I cannot rest until this brigandage is knocked out.'

As one of his large family, five girls and one boy and then aged 20, I can well remember the terrible strain in our house that year. My father was distraught and perpetually seething with rage. This was only shown among the family, not in his diary. There were still picnics and entertaining of visitors, family and friends; many of them French clients, but being frustrated in matters beyond his control my father seemed to come down hard over those whom he had control, especially his older children and we began to wonder what he had done to cause the problem. None of our friends in Australia and their families seemed to have similar disturbances.

Indeed they did not. But then they did not live out their lives in the shadow of the Condominium Government of the New Hebrides in which the British side was loath to protect its settlers, and we heartily wished that neither did we have to be protective of our father. Our mother with her light touch was the only one who could soothe his ravaged self-esteem; she, and his youngest daughter Nancy now aged 8. Two of his daughters, Joyce and I, had jobs outside the family which gave us a certain amount of relief; Muriel was about to be married and Margaret about to work for Kerr Bros. My only brother aged fifteen was still at school and Nancy too young to take in the situation. We were told nothing and had no desire to learn.

What I wrote in much of this chapter is barely echoed in my father's 1937 diary. The diary is a very full one, devoted to actions, work was never off the agenda and certain undercurrents were suggested but not spelled out. It took considerable research for me to find out the shadowy matters underlying his work life and, in the diaries, there was little mention of members of his family and how the family might have been affected by his preoccupations.

In his diary, 1937 was ushered in by the usual big New Year Party and no hint of problems.

By June he was consulting agents about selling 'Kermadec', our lovely family home in Lane Cove, and disposing of the three and a half acres of undisturbed bushland in which it was set. The Depression was still being felt and money was tight with the projected removal of the family to Noumea; with nothing coming in from shares held in France; with a business in Sydney to keep going and a new one in New Caledonia; and with mounting legal expenses. Again he would be frustrated as the Green Belt was still in existence in Sydney which impeded such sale. His children loved their home and were glad for the reprieve.

Much of the early part of the year was taken up with his solicitors Perkins, Stevenson & Co and he had several sessions with Jules de Leener, a valuable person to consult because of his earlier experience at the Joint Court and also a friend.

Kerr was also busy looking up documents and writing letters about *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which had to be translated into French and be sent to Vila, as well as dealing with the newly set up *Société Kerr/My* formed from the erstwhile Australian registered company East Santo Plantations.

Part of Kerr Bros business meant Graham Kerr was always available to meet and see through Customs friends and clients, French and English, from the New Hebrides and to find doctors and hospitals for them if required. He and Guillemot hunted down a good second-hand car for Jean My which was sent to the New Hebrides on 14 April on board *Morinda*. Guillemot was also aboard on another business trip from which he returned on 3 June.

Then on 5 July Graham Kerr left for Noumea on *Pierre Loti*. Here he saw his French lawyer Marcel Coursin and also Louis Fricotte about a mining option Fricotte wanted to offer Australia. He was also looking for an office for *Société Kerr/My* and on 2 August he inspected No. 8 Rue Jean Jaures near the Quay.

In Vila on 28 July he saw Ballard who gave him documents for Coursin dealing with the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* suit.

In Noumea again he met up with Guillemot and saw the Manager of *Messageries Maritimes* to try and arrange for a three-monthly trip of one of their vessels to Hog Harbour.

Following discussion with Marcel Coursin and his father on 9 August, Kerr decided 'that the best thing will be to bring the case to Noumea on Appeal. Coursin will instruct Ballard what to do at Vila'. This was the worst thing he could have done. It was exactly what his opponents in Paris would have wanted. Surely the case should have been left with Ballard, but Graham Kerr was beginning to have little great faith in him and the French Court in Vila certainly seemed to pay no heed to Ballard's demands on his behalf.

Graham Kerr and Henri Guillemot left for Vila on 11 August where Guillemot translated some material provided by Ballard into French to be forwarded to Coursin. Then they both went north to Santo. Francois met Kerr at Segond Channel in *Toa* for the trip north to Hog Harbour, while Guillemot remained in Segond to deal with business. Kerr remained in Hog Harbour until *Morinda* arrived when he left for Vila.

Kerr was most impressed with the improvements Jules Jocteur had brought about. He ruminated on how much better things would have been if Jocteur had been employed earlier in place of Robertson and others.

As with 1936, the diary entries at this time show his close and friendly dealings with such people as Houchard, Dedieu, Gané, Ratards, Deplanques, Douyeres, and Pascal Michel. He was frequently offered overnight hospitality and remarked on the friendliness of their reception.

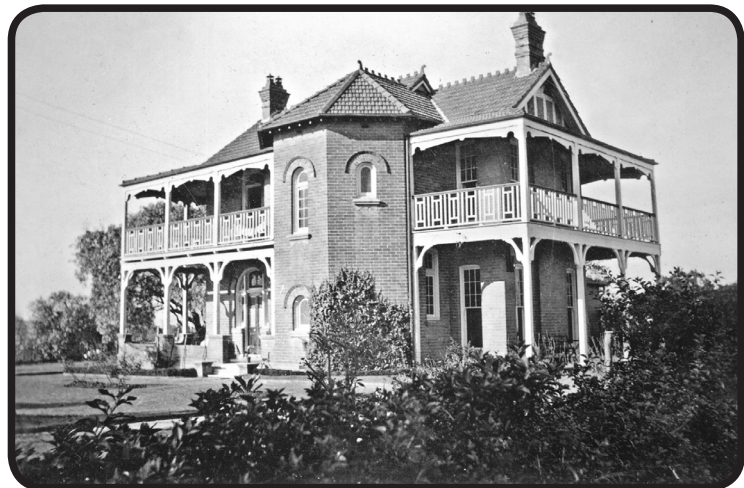


Photo 69: Kermadec, Richardson Street East, Lane Cove before the early 1930s



Photo 70: Circular Key circa 1937–38. One of many family farewells for Graham Kerr leaving for the Islands—left to right Muriel, Graham, Gem (Muriel), Margaret and Katherine Kerr

He and Guillemot were in New Hebrides and Noumea for most of the last six months of 1937, consulting with Ballard and Coursin and arranging for the first Annual meeting of the shareholders of *Société Kerr/My* which was held on 17 September.

It was while he was in Vila on 9 September that the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* suit came on. It was only a formality he wrote in his diary. 'Ballard for us will ask for six months adjournment but may only get one month.' They were given one month when the competence of the French Court to hold the trial was to be debated.

He left the same day for Noumea. The first annual meeting of shareholders of *Société Kerr/My* was due but before that, Graham Kerr wanted to arrange for an extraordinary general meeting to increase their capital and allot shares to the Julliens, George Millar, Houchard and Guillemot. An office was set up on 21 September at 8 Rue Jean Jaures, near the wharf that he had inspected earlier and which by strange coincidence had belonged many years earlier to his uncle Captain Donald Macleod. He was also discussing a mine option which Louis Fricotte wanted advertised in Australia.

Pierre Loti arrived in Noumea on 2 October with Guillemot who had done good business in the New Hebrides. Unable to relax and I am sure missing his family, Kerr thought he might return to Sydney on *Pierre Loti* via Noumea on 23 October, this time with his brother D.H. Kerr. But on 2 November he went with Guillemot to see the *Société Kerr/My* auditor Monsieur Leleu who was to place a notice in the *Bulletin du Commerce* for the up-coming annual General Meeting and Extraordinary General meeting of *Société Kerr/My* for 6 December. All the necessary figures were now ready for Leleu to start his audit.

On 8 November Kerr saw Coursin about a letter from Ballard 'who has the gang pretty well in a hole'.

He was trying to find a likely site for a fuel depot for the Texan Co. if it decided to enter the New Caledonia trade. There was a business trip with D.H. Kerr and Guillemot to La Foa, Thio and Nackety, arriving back in Noumea on 13 November.

Unfortunately Monsieur Leleu, *Société Kerr/My*'s just appointed auditor 'has slipped us up'. Graham Kerr went to see the notary Ducasse on 22 November with George Ventrillon, a staff member of *Société Kerr/My*, and there saw Leleu. It was very difficult to get another auditor at short notice.

Another business trip to the New Hebrides was undertaken on 23 November during which Kerr met most of the firm's clients arriving back at Vila on 3 December where he saw Ballard before departing on the same day for Noumea. On 5 December accompanied by Jean My, D.H. Kerr, and Guillemot he managed to arrange an extraordinary general meeting of *Société Kerr/My* for that very day as he and D.H. Kerr wanted to return to Sydney on the same ship. The meeting was held at the new office, capital being increased to 2,000,000 F. Before leaving for Sydney they sold *Toa* to Tiby Hagen for 47,500 F. Tiby Hagen was a close ally of Aupied and Raoul-Duval and long-time rival of Kerr Bros Ltd. He would always remain remarkably silent about *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* matters.

The Kerr brothers were back in Sydney by 9 December. There was the usual hectic pre-Christmas rush which included a visit to White City to see Budge, von Cramm and Bromwich play tennis; to Jenolan Caves to show a French client, Léon Theuil, the sights; and on 31 December he and Muriel went to town to the St James Theatre to see Greta Garbo and Charles Boyer in the film *Marie Waleska*. Then home to Kermadec where they waited up to see the old year out and the New Year in:

It has been a very trying and worrying year. Hoping something better for 1938.

I will end this chapter with a puzzle. Why did British authorities not intervene to quash the absurd case? Perhaps a remark in a letter Ballard wrote to Graham Kerr's Sydney solicitors, Perkins Stevenson, on 8 June 1937 after attending the French Court throws light:

A matter which ought not to affect the legal position in that Mr Kerr has applied for French naturalisation and the Court knows it. That would make it embarrassing for him to protest unduly against submitting to a French court; another thing is he wrote a letter to the Administrative authorities making such a protest in very lively terms ... what effect that will have if any I cannot predict.³⁰



Photo 71: Circular Key circa 1937–38. Close up of Katherine (left) and Margaret Kerr at farewell for Graham Kerr leaving for the Islands

Concerning naturalisation, the arrangement Kerr had come to with Julliens, Valette, André Joyer, and the French parliamentary opposition they had gathered in Paris to get Aupied removed, was based on his knowledge of plantation management and his integrity. But he, as a foreigner, would have to take out French papers in order to become Director of the proposed new *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* with its headquarters now in Noumea, and in this way again to get the plantations in full pro-

duction to aid the shareholders who stood to get nothing if Aupied and his backers had their way. Thus he regarded naturalisation as an honour not an embarrassment. Knowing what good plantations the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* owned in the New Hebrides, he said he would take up the job for a year to get things properly and honestly organised and then he would retire in favour of a Frenchman.

But an obstacle had to be overcome for this to happen. In 1934 after *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* went bankrupt, the French government had arranged to bail them out on condition they ceased all plantation work and sold or leased the properties. So enthusiastic was Kerr about the possibilities of great financial gain for France to be achieved by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* plantation development in New Hebrides that he put his—what now seem like grandiose ideas—to Valette and the Julliens, suggesting that they try and assemble a group of business men in Marseilles to buy up *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shares at the current low price in order to get control of its most valuable properties. Would the faction that supported him be able to bring this about? Was he getting ahead of himself?³¹

He had become deeply involved in French politics in which two factions of the French Parliament were involved. One led by André Joyer whose well-substantiated accusations against Aupied had brought about Aupied's removal from the *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* with similar accusations by Kerr and H. Rohr also mentioned. In fact Kerr, supported by the Julliens in Marseilles and the parliamentary support the Julliens had gathered became a plank in that faction's attempt to get *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* out of its financial difficulties. The opposing faction headed by Aupied realised that for them to succeed against Joyer, Graham Kerr's reputation for honesty in France, not questioned by French settlers in the Group, had to be destroyed. The case mounted against him in Vila was the result.

He never became a French citizen. By Condominium law British and French subjects had to retain their own nationality. Only foreign settlers could choose.

Colonial Office Condominium policy was to avoid trouble with France and to disregard the requests of British nationals for assistance. If choice was allowed, so disgusted were British settlers at the treatment they received, there might well have been a rush on to take up French nationality.

It was thus not a matter of disloyalty to one's own nation but one of making a living when French settlers were given every advantage by France. This returning to the immutable fact that France, from the start, wanted the New Hebrides and England did not.

The stigma of disloyalty to Britain remained, although British policy towards British subjects was the root of the problem and explains the 'embarrassment' mentioned by Ballard which Graham Kerr did not feel. Many times during his long career in the Group he had pointed out the unfair status of British subjects, the lack of help given by Australia, and the way the New Hebrides Mission insisted on stirring up trouble in its efforts to get rid of the French rousing the French to further intransigence.

Following in the footsteps of his uncle Captain Donald Macleod, another stirrer, would British authorities have ever felt inclined to take up cudgels for him, however unjust the case against him? Perhaps they saw him as attacking the British themselves and there were troubles enough in Europe already.

His actions can be seen as the direct result of British policy. If support for the reasonable demands of British nationals had ever been offered, would Graham Kerr have sold out to the French in the first place? I doubt it. They had been warned by Merton King and Smith-Rewse what would happen if British policy was not altered. Now it was coming home to roost. Embarrassing? Yes, but to whom?

As regards the second point in Ballard's letter to Perkins Stevenson about the 'lively' letter Graham Kerr wrote, it was certainly not diplomatic but then it was not meant to be; just truthful. His own British authorities seemed to be doing nothing so what else could he do?

Strangely, or perhaps it was not so strange—my sister Muriel and I were in the early stages of unravelling our family history for this period and she was helping me with the translations. After translating back into English the letter our father sent to the French Resident Commissioner in March 1937, she exploded with anger on reading him say that his 'sympathies had always been French'. She said, 'shame on you my father, after the dreadful things they were doing to you'. At the time I agreed with her.

But, like Ballard, we did not then know the rest of the story which was that our father was trusted by an honourable group of people in France who hoped to use his case to get rid of just one of the many financial scandals that were contaminating their home country. I believe this puts a different slant on things.

The last thing Graham Kerr wanted was to be involved in French politics. I can only think that he was the innocent victim of an impossible situation, not only in the New Hebrides but in Europe.

With the Second World War about to erupt, it looked as if he would be left to fight his unequal battle alone.



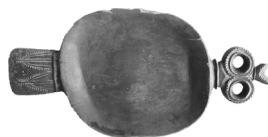
Endnotes

- 1 See Black Envelope No. 3 Maurice Valette Letter File. Valette also sent by sea mail a copy of the summons. For all letters Valette/Kerr in this chapter not otherwise pinpointed, see this file.
- 2 Article XII of Anglo-French Agreement of 1906 and upheld in the Protocol of 1914 was: "The Joint Court shall have jurisdiction (1) in civil (including commercial) cases: (A) over all suits respecting land in the Group. Article XX: National Jurisdiction. (2). Civil suits between non-natives, other than land suits shall be brought before the Court having jurisdiction over the Defendant.
- 3 Andre Joyer led the party of disaffected SFNH shareholders trying to oust Aupied.
- 4 Never mentioned by name, the strong Ministerial support was almost certainly from Pierre Laval who had also been implicated in the Stavisky case but managed to extricate himself.
- 5 Aupied would try to get round this by saying that the case was one of money value. Of course it was—money paid for a British property in the New Hebrides. The production figures given by SFNH itself, based on the tree count reached by the 'experts'—meaning Vibert—could not possibly have reached that production figure.
- 6 See White Envelope No. 6. Criticisms of SFNH by G.L.S. Kerr. For another copy of this letter dated 12 March 1937 see Folder 10. Xeroxes from *Outre Mer Archives*, 71 APC, SFNH. *Serie II, Affaire Kerr*. In it he pulled no punches. Regarding the committee of 'experts' he wanted to know the exact details of their examination, where they began and where they ended. 'If the person in charge of the affair, or his representative agrees to appear with me before a Tribunal before which I can LEGALLY appear, I shall give him an exact plan of the different areas planted at the time of the sale 10 years previously'. Kerr always kept such papers. His letter ended: 'My sentiments have always been French and it is very well known. Any enquiry with a foundation of complete impartiality, will always receive my fullest agreement'. Perhaps this last sentence contains part of the reason why British authorities turned a blind eye to his predicament? In his reply Henri Sautot told my father on 29 April that he had consulted the French High Commissioner in Noumea. 'The Chief of the Judicial Service there said that, as the contract of sale took place between you and SFNH having been passed under French law, the French court was solely competent to judge by virtue of Article 20, para. 2A of the Protocol of August 1914.' Hence Sautot could not intervene. But this was wrong because the contract of sale was not passed under French law but that of the Condominium regarding sales of real estate in New Hebrides contested by British and French settlers, in which the Defendant, my father, was entitled to trial under British law in the Joint Court.
- 7 The Protocol of 1914 did not substantially alter the relevant Article of 1906.
- 8 Valette makes some very sensible points to Graham Kerr about the importance of communicating his position to the French Court so the could understand Kerr's position from his own point of view ed.
- 9 This was Clifford C. Francis, who first acted in the position in the absence of Robert de Vere in 1925 before taking over permanently. He had been seconded from the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and had no background in French law.
- 10 S.M.H. 27 Nov 1937, p. 10. Editorial
- 11 S.M.H. 27 Nov 1937, p. 10. Frater, Maurice. New Hebrides. Dual control and its reactions.
- 12 See White Envelope No. 6. Criticisms of SFNH by G.L.S. Kerr. For another copy of this letter dated 12 March 1937 see Folder 10. Xeroxes from *Outre Mer Archives*, 71 APC, SFNH. *Serie II, Affaire Kerr*.
- 13 Later in the year the name Marcel Neveu came up. He was, known to the Julliens and had all the required qualifications. If he took the job he would have to take out shares in Kerr Bros. Ltd and would be located in Sydney in the position of dual Manager with George Millar. See Black Envelope No 3 Valette Letter File, 12 Oct. 1937; 10 Nov. 1937.
- 14 See Paris Notebook No.2:18–19. *Outre Mer Archives* 71 APC. SFNH. *Serie II Affaire Kerr*.
- 15 At Pango which he himself was in process of buying.
- 16 Document copied in Paris Notebook No. 2:28.
- 17 Document copied in Paris Notebook No 2:32 and 39–40.
- 18 Document copied in Paris Note book No 2:31, 33.
- 19 Document copied in Paris Notebook No. 2:13.
- 20 Document copied in Paris Notebook No. 2:74–77.
- 21 See White Envelope No. 6. Criticisms of SFNH by G.L.S. Kerr. For another copy of this letter dated 12 March 1937 see Folder 10. Xeroxes from *Outre Mer Archives*, 71 APC, SFNH. *Serie II, Affaire Kerr*.
- 22 . See Paris Notebook No. 2:12.
- 23 See Green Clipped Folder. Ballard Letter File. Ballard to Kerr 9 Jan 1937. All letters between Kerr and Ballard are in this file in chronological order.
- 24 Perkins Stevenson correspondence is included with Ballard Letter File in Green Clipped Folder.
- 25 This probably refers to the figure D.H. Kerr gave off the top of his head, after the option was taken up, and which Audoin and Vibert tried in vain to make into a formal agreement with D.H. Kerr's signature to confirm it in April 1928.
- 26 See Folder 10 for a copy of this report of Fernand Largeau dated 15 March 1927 on Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu plantations. Xerox from the *Outre Mer Archives*. 71 APC. SFNH. *Serie II*, No. 29. *Kerr—Administrateur*.

Chapter 19 1937: Graham Kerr Gets Himself Deeper in the Mire

After finding that the report was favourable to the Kerrs it would no longer be mentioned by the Opposition. Folder 10 is a plain manila folder in Archive Box 24 which Katherine Cawsey says is 'important for the second part of my book on New Hebrides—Dad's story' (ed.)

- 27 WPHC 916/1923. King to Rodwell 19 April 1923.
- 28 See White Envelope No. 6. Criticisms of SFNH by G.L.S. Kerr.
- 29 See Green Clipped Folder. Ballard Letter file for a copy of the French judgment, date 26 June 1937.
- 30 See Green Clipped Folder. Ballard Letter File.
- 31 See Black Envelope No. 3 Valette Letter File. Kerr to Valette, 24 Dec 1937. He suggested to Valette that if an honest group of people could get control of SFNH plantations in the Group 'there is a very good man in the Islands—a clean straightforward man—Monsieur Caillard, who may be available to control the plantations. He is at present in charge of *Compagnie Cotonniere* at Malekula, but that company is getting more or less into the control of Ballandes of Bordeaux'. Aupied in his campaign made a strong point of not letting a foreigner—my father—get control of SFNH, something that was never on the cards. At almost 65, my father considered himself too old for the job.



Chapter 20 1938: Graham Kerr at Last Realises what He is Up Against

On the last day of 1937 Des Granges received news from Paris following consultation between *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*'s lawyers and Professor Hamel about its right to bring a case against the Kerrs. This was followed up by a telegram on 20 January 1938, telling him that Hamel considered it possible not only to sue the Kerr family personally but also the former Kerr Bros. Ltd and even *Société Kerr/My*.

Hamel had been given a carefully selected dossier, which left out the documents that showed that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had no case. By now Graham Kerr was beginning to realise the ruthlessness of the opposition and that they would stop at nothing to ruin him. From his diary this year, although nothing stopped the rush of his almost inhuman work load, there are many entries about how ill and worried he felt. Attacks of giddiness he put down to wrong diet but I am sure they were signs of high blood pressure and stress.

He was in New Hebrides and Noumea until late February when he received letters from Valette which included the latter's defence before the *Tribunal de Commerce de Paris* and the strong conclusions his lawyer had drawn when it went before the President and Judges on 31 January. In a letter dated 8 February Valette said that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had responded saying that Valette's defence was 'ill founded'. This was followed by more accusations. 'It remains for us to arm ourselves with patience.' His lawyer, Me. Seneque, in his turn would do the same.¹

Valette had earlier asked Graham Kerr did he know anything of the leasing arrangements for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* plantations in New Hebrides. On 23 February came the reply that

... from the point of view of the good of SFNH, I cannot agree with the leasing arrangement ... It is fatal to the advancement of the SFNH. I would further say that, in my opinion, it is not at all realised in France what valuable properties are held by SFNH ... Under this insane leasing arrangement, the plantation properties will not show any natural development. Under a properly controlled scheme, there would be continual development and increased value.²

Graham Kerr was looking forward to the arrival of Marcel Neveu, recommended to Kerr Bros by the Julliens, to discuss the matter with him.

On 29 March Valette told him that Kerr's case, which was supposed to come before the *Tribunal* on 14 March, had again been postponed for a fortnight. In the interim *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had just put out a writ of seizure—*saisie-arrêt*—on all money that Julliens might hold to the credit of Kerr Bros. A copy of the order was included with the letter.

Earlier, in anticipation of this, the Julliens had suggested that Kerr Bros put themselves in debt to them instead of credit and now Valette began to worry about the shares held in the Marseilles' safe deposit box at *Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris*, which had been deposited there as guarantee of overdraft from *Société Kerr/My*. The Bank held 966 *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* Founders Shares valued on the basis of 125F per share. These had been, allotted to Kerr Bros Ltd as a big share-

holder, first in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, then *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. The ones involved in Valette's law suit were *actions*, ordinary shares.

Valette wrote that, in his opinion, it was extremely dangerous to allow these shares to be in France. He knew that they were not under the name of Kerr but *Société Kerr/My* but 'with the kind of adversaries we have, it can be expected that one day or another there will be a battle as to their ownership'. Valette had taken it on himself to direct the Bank to send them immediately to its branch in Sydney.

On arrival Graham Kerr should immediately withdraw them and not let any circulate until his case in Vila had concluded, which was still held up while the competence of the French Court in Vila to try him was being decided. These shares, Valette thought, were in no immediate danger as they belonged to *Société Kerr/My* but it was better not to take the risk of seizure.

Valette included a statement of legal costs to the end of 1937 from which he had deducted the sum he had got for the sale of 18 of Kerr's Founders Shares. It came to 5,786,20F. Following the seizure-writ taken out against the Julliens, Kerr's name must not appear on accounts with them, so the official debit notification, Kerr Bros to the Julliens was to appear as money debited to *Société Kerr/My*.

The Julliens had Power of Attorney to open the now almost empty safe deposit box.³ They were consulting with their lawyer before doing so. If, after the seizure-writ, Julliens were told by the process-server to open it, nothing would be found and Julliens could not then be accused of spiriting away the shares to prevent seizure.

You see, dear Sir, that I am taking every precaution possible; have no illusions that you are faced with dangerous people and I recommend that you never again treat with contempt their doings.

Concerning Charles Aupied, the reports of the Judicial Committee were entirely unfavourable but as there was no protest from outsiders, Parliament took no action. The Director-General of Registration *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, Tronchon, implicated in the affair, had been dismissed. Valette wrote:

To be able to put this lovely lot in prison it would be necessary for the shareholders to act. The matter being under the control of the Government, the case in the Assizes would be an actual lawsuit against the Minister for Colonies and the Government, who are the real ones at fault since they have not exercised the control which their position on the Board of Management of SFNH gave them.⁴

But with its double shareholder vote, Parliament could arrange that other shareholders for instance, Kerr, Joyer and others had no say. It becomes more and more obvious that Kerr's French political enemies in France, to save their own bacon, were banking on finding him guilty in Vila. He was a perfect scapegoat. A foreigner with no fluent knowledge of French to be asked to defend himself personally in a French court to which it was not certain that he could legally be called to account.

Since 1912, when *Tathra* foundered in the New Hebrides, my father had trouble with his shins which had been badly torn on the coral reefs of the Maskelynes. As if he did not have enough worries, they troubled him again, but on 21 April, after the arrival of Marcel Neveu, he wrote to Valette that he felt better. He was much taken by Neveu and thought that he would be a great acquisition to the firm. He expected his case to come off in Vila in May. He and Neveu were going to Noumea and New Hebrides at the end of April.

Graham Kerr was now considering bringing a case for damages in the British Court against Aupied. He did not know about French law but considered he had a strong case in British law.

Here is a man who has been in control for years, and who did nothing until I crossed him in his bleeding of SFNH, now bringing actions to harass me in every way possible; yet he has no possible chance of gaining a case against me, and he must know it ... He is

not using his own money in the processes, but that of the poor unfortunate shareholders of SFNH, including ourselves.

Graham Kerr was not yet aware of the overwhelming power wielded by his enemies despite the chicanery of their accusations.

On 18 April the *Tribunal de Commerce* refused to allow the shares to be put under Valette's name.⁵ But on 6 May Me. Seneque at last, was permitted to argue Valette's case. In a letter that day he wrote to Valette that deliberation lasted over an hour and despite all his efforts he considered the case lost. He could not imagine what judicial measures the Judge could employ to make Valette's request seem unacceptable. He realised from the start that he was up against a judge completely biased against Valette. He was left with a very bad impression of the whole Court. Never in fifteen years had he faced such a biased judge.

On 1 June Valette replied to Seneque's letter. He had been expecting immediate judgment to be handed down and had delayed his reply. He thought that the judge would certainly have difficulty wording his judgment. The shares have to belong to someone. If not under Mr Kerr's name, as Valette had originally asked, and been refused, why not his? How does *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* explain? He was very curious to see the judgment. Why the delay? What will be the costs? If we appeal before receiving Mr Kerr's instructions and have to abandon it, what would be the cost? The law suit, to take place in Noumea if and when the French Court's competence to try Mr Kerr is proved, is still in abeyance. Valette wrote that if Kerr wins that case, the result will automatically settle the question here.

Valette wrote immediately to see if Kerr would agree to an appeal.

It seems to us very difficult for the judgment of the *Tribunal* to be strongly supported by law.

On 24 June Me. Seneque wrote to Valette. He was sorry about the costs involved but the case should not be abandoned on the judgment of one judge, given on very shaky legal grounds:

It is public knowledge that the Judge in question is hand-in-glove with our adversaries—SFNH—but there is talk of his going to another posting. Another Judge would considerably purify the atmosphere of litigation.

Meantime Seneque was playing for time while finding out what costs would be.

Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides's next move against Kerr came on 13 July when the French Consul in Sydney sent G.L.S. Kerr a legal document drawn up in his name.⁶ It included copies of the seizure-writs which had been delivered to the Julliens and Raoul-Duval on 23 May.

The reason for their issue was the case against Kerr by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* raised in the French Court in Vila where a panel of experts—set up by order of the President of that court under the command of the Deputy Director of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* (Leon Vibert)—had found discrepancies in the tree count of coconuts and cacao (as calculated ten years earlier) wrong, to the value of four million francs in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides's* favour. The panel of experts had set off to Santo with Vibert 8 December 1936 and completed their task in six days, by 14 December 1936.

That was the lawsuit Graham Kerr did not attend because of the preposterousness of the claim and because he could not, as a British subject under Condominium law, be tried in the French court. This was the same case the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was using in Paris to try and stop Valette from registering the Kerr family shares in his own name.

It was not until 28 July that the *Tribunal de Commerce* was forced into the position of having to bring down a judgment as to whether Maurice Valette was the owner of the disputed shares or not. The news was sent to Sydney by cable by Valette's brother, Eduard Maurice Valette, who had gone to Paris to make a vigorous appeal fearing that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would use its influence with the *Tribunal*.

It seems that although the Judge was against us, he had not reached an assured and well-founded conclusion.

Valette made it clear to the court that if there was further delay, it would not be the end.

Very embarrassed, the Judge then took the case to the Chamber of Enquiry. The lawyers for both sides had exhausted their right to plead and the decision was finally given in Valette's favour, ordering the registration of the shares in his name, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* being condemned to pay 100,000F in costs and damages.

On 2 August Maurice Valette, who had been waiting for more than three months for the Judge to find a way to condemn him, wrote:

All the same I cannot accept, without trying to do something about it ... It is my right to tell the Judge: 'You have a dossier of a case on appeal since the month of May—whatever your decision we have a right to know before the holidays ... The case has lasted too long ... If I do not get a response from you, I will be obliged to write to M. Paul Reynaud, Minister for Justice, to whom the people of Provence always have easy access.

He had sent a letter to this effect and was just about to set off again to Paris when he received a message from one of his lawyers informing him that, much to his astonishment, the lawsuit had been re-examined in the Council Chamber and 24 hours later the judgment was given in Valette's favour. The next day the court went on vacation.

He knew that *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would mount an appeal but he would meet them 'sword in hand' and with the advantage of a judgement in his favour.

You may well believe, dear Sir the pleasure I will get... and knowing the grudge you have against Aupied I am convinced that apart from the material gain that should finally result, you are going to get moral satisfaction.

His case being won, Valette now turned to the one pending against Graham Kerr in Vila. On 10 August he wrote asking for the outline of events as they stood, from a judicial point of view:

(1) Committee of 'experts' to do a tree review; (2) The first ones selected excused themselves. Did they give their reasons? (3) Election of new 'experts'; (4) Deposit of their report, not in your favour; (5) Appeal on that account before the French court in Vila; (6) Your claim of incompetence of the court to deal with the case; and (7) The court declares itself competent and finally your appeal to Noumea on this last point, which brings things up to date.

As a result of the 'experts' opinion fed to them by Vibert and the judgment given against Graham Kerr in the French court but still no final judgment, Valette thought the writ of seizure of Kerr's assets handed to the Julliens in Marseilles and Raoul-Duval in Le Havre, was not valid.⁷

He then wrote that since *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* has called you an Australian subject before the French court at Port Vila, it seems to me that you ought to be able to call them French subjects before the British court in the same place. And he outlined the points Graham Kerr should bring up:

- (1) That he sold plantations in 1927 and that no legal protest was raised until 1936;
- (2) SFNH now protests and arraigns the Kerrs before a French court;
- (3) That a committee of experts has been set up against all good commonsense to carry out a tree count after the passage of nine years;

- (4) That the SFNH has issued writs against the business houses of Julliens and Raoul-Duval;
- (5) And in doing this SFNH has done considerable moral and business damage to Mr Kerr in France and he should be given damages;
- (6) Additionally he was owner of Founders Shares, not to mention ordinary shares, and suffers a big loss from the situation in which SFNH finds itself;
- (7) That it is necessary to look at the way the plantations have been managed;
- (8) That Mr Kerr who had received Founders Shares in payment for the properties sold, demands a reimbursement and finally;
- (9) That they have lost their value as a result of the neglect of SFNH.

Graham Kerr's lawyer in Vila, B.C. Ballard, in consultation with the French lawyer Marcel Coursin thought he should get official certificates of the dissolution of the defendant company Kerr Bros. Ltd and the setting up of East Santo Plantations in November 1928 from the Registrar General's Department in Sydney and have it visaed by the French Consul-General. This he had already requested on 28 January.⁸

Both the original Kerr Bros. Ltd and East Santo Plantations—liquidated 21 July 1936 when it became *Société Kerr/My*—no longer existed in 1938. The liquidator in both cases was Miss Agnes Kerr. Ballard was on vacation in Melbourne and before returning to Vila on 12 May was to collect the documents in Sydney. Whether he did I do not know as Graham Kerr left for Noumea on 5 May.

Aupied was trying to get possession of Hog Harbour Plantation as well as any other Kerr property he could lay his hands on but it was not all plain sailing. From letters I found in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris he was not getting the news he wanted from Vila. The *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* Director, Leon Vibert, at the end of February 1938 told him, something that Ballard had hinted to Kerr on 3 November 1937.

The French Judge D—with whom I have good relations, told me, during the time we spent together in Noumea, that SFNH had undertaken a case it cannot win ... Des Granges and I share absolutely the same opinion but neither the one nor the other can write what we think, which we leave you to guess.⁹

Again at the end of July 1938 in reply to a letter sent to Paris 6 May it seemed that Des Granges was not cooperating. He had been asked to obtain from *Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides*—Ballandès—duplicates of Certificates of Origin for produce exported and bills of lading for business they might be doing with *Société Kerr/My* which they refused to hand over. Des Granges told Vibert that he was *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* defence lawyer in real-estate matters not their business agent.

And on 12 August Vibert told Aupied of the 'new attitude of the Judge previously favourable to us and today, if not hostile, at least strongly sceptical'. He thought this was the reason behind Des Grange's reported decision to resign from the case.

In the meantime on 13 July Graham Kerr received from the French Consul in Sydney copies the writs of seizure previously delivered to Raoul-Duval of Le Havre and Julliens of Marseilles for any property they might have belonging to Kerr Bros. and Graham Kerr personally. The writ set out the reasons for its issue which included a debt the Kerrs owed *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* of 4 million francs for discrepancy in tree numbers on plantations which had been calculated in six days by three 'experts' the previous December. To this would be added the cost of the writ, 2,500,000F, when *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* won its case—not if. This was when the competence of the French Court in Vila to hear was still being decided.

Then on 27 July judgement was finally brought down by the *Tribunal de Commerce* following the appeal of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* against the previous judgment in favour of Maurice Valette. *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*'s lawyer brought out very clearly French Government interest in the case which he sought to enhance by appealing to French patriotism. He brought up a special law passed on 31 March 1933 which placed the then bankrupt *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* under the control of the French Government 'which for overseas political reasons [not given

here] agreed to take charge of its administration'. The French government, fearing foreign interference from an ordinary private company, passed a law on 15 July 1935 by the terms of which *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shareholders had to put their 'bearer' shares under their own names. Transfer of such shares had to be agreed to by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* or a Government Commissioner. This, the lawyer said, was to avoid 'all foreign or undesirable influence and the decision reached was not to be called into account'.

The 'foreign' element mentioned was Graham Kerr, an Australian subject and big shareholder in *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* as a result of the amalgamation of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in July 1930 and a member of the *Conseil* until November 1932. This was when Kerr told the General Assembly of shareholders in Paris that the financial depredation and mismanagement of Aupied and his followers was sending the company bankrupt. He was for his pains voted off the *Conseil* and marked by Aupied as a dangerous enemy to be destroyed in whatever way possible.

Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides's lawyer then raised the tree count and the dishonesty of Graham Kerr—something that Aupied had to establish from the outset so that the Parliamentary faction that Joyer and the Julliens had rallied against him would withdraw their support from Kerr. This was against someone who had written to the French Minister for Colonies in 1936 proposing that with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* be located in Noumea, not Paris and who said he was prepared to take charge for a year to put the plantations owned by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in order so that shareholders would see some value for their investment.¹⁰

As expected, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* mounted another appeal against Valette which necessitated more lawyers' fees 'to show our opponents that we will follow through to the end'. Until a decision was finally reached, Valette could not attend *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shareholders' meetings but, probably through André Joyer, he kept Kerr up-to-date with developments.

Valette's feeling about *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had not changed. It could not be revived and its shares had reached the lowest quotation on record. In his letter dated 24 November 1938 he told Kerr that the French Government now completely controlled *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*; its *Conseil* consisting of civil servants whose sole aim is for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to cause them as little trouble as possible.

On 1 December Valette sent a letter about an extraordinary meeting of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* held on 25 November. Following an amendment put forward about salaries, there was a dispute between the former and current members of the *Conseil* which went on for three hours, with no result as the State with its plural vote controlled the outcome:

The whole thing is real anarchy and it is impossible to get details about what is going on in the Islands.

Kerr could have told them but that was the last thing the *Conseil* wanted to hear. Ballandes of Bordeaux, which had a permanent seat on the *Conseil*, was now being attacked by Aupied probably because it refused to act against the Kerrs. Valette thought that the French Parliament was really in the dark and that the present Minister for Colonies was more and more worried about the whole 'dirty business'.¹¹

He asked Kerr for the local news from the Islands regarding selling and leasing the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* plantations. Kerr's came back on 31 December.

It is tragically deplorable the 'mess' things have got into. What is wrong with Government representatives, to allow the brigands to carry on their evil doings? I cannot understand at all ... As far as I know, the Plantations have been let to ex-employees; including Vibert. I do not know the conditions of lease. There are very valuable properties and they could certainly be sold, but it would be very difficult to place a value on them offhand ... Japanese would soon come in and buy them if they were allowed to. Probably some of the powerful Australian companies would be glad to come in. No doubt the French

government would put restrictions on foreign ownership. What is wrong with French business interests? Can they see nothing beyond the Bourse? [Aupied was a stockbroker].

I suppose it is too far away for them to visualise any practical business operations in these 'dots' in the Pacific Ocean. Yet surely their capital might be safer here than in troubled Europe. Not that the Pacific will forever escape the warlike fever of the times. However the Islands are not important enough in themselves, except for New Caledonia with her mineral wealth ... I am afraid the French people are home-stickers—no vision beyond '*La Belle France*'. Unfortunately surrounded by barbarians of the type of Hitler and the would-be Napoleon in Italy, Lord knows what it is going to lead to.¹²

The world would sadly soon find out, as 1938 was the last year of comparative 'peace' before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

In 1938 there was the still not settled question of which Court in Vila was competent to 'try' Graham Kerr. In addition setting up *Société Kerr/My* was by no means easy. Kerr was hoping that with the advent of Marcel Neveu from Marseilles to work with Kerr Bros in Sydney, things would improve. He arrived back in Sydney on 19 February 1938 from a quick trip to the Group he had made on *Pierre Loti* on 15 January.

In Vila Graham Kerr found an office and appointed Albert Jocteur to work for the newly set-up company. They then went north to introduce the Jocteur to clients and visited Hog Harbour where they met up with Albert's brother Jules Jocteur who was managing the plantation there.

As so often happened after a visit to the islands Kerr was ill with fever. He had arrived back in Sydney loaded up with various pieces of equipment from expectant clients for repair in Sydney.

He was very family-oriented and there were many social festivities at this time culminating in the marriage of his daughter Muriel on 12 March 1938.

On 8 April a family group in two cars paid a visit to Canberra, some of them camping. Graham left Muriel Kerr at Brassey House to rest while he went with the campers intending to walk back to Brassey later. He became lost finding his way back and did not make it till 10pm:

This place is like a city of the dead without a living soul to be seen to ask the way—cars passed but I dare not stop them or they would probably think it was a hold-up. [Despite this he was] glad to have seen the Federal Capital—a nice city in the making.



Photo 72: Muriel (Gem) Kerr with Dudley Bogg on 11 March 1938, the day before their wedding—photo provided in 2018 by Lindsay Benaud (née Bogg), Muriel's daughter



Photo 73: Muriel's Wedding 12 March 1938, Joyce (24), Margaret (18) and Katherine Kerr (20)—Margaret was the bridesmaid.. Photo in author's possession/archive.

Neveu with his friend Mme. Kerorio arrived in Sydney on 14 April on board *Mooltan*. They were met by Graham Kerr, George Millar and D.H. Kerr and delivered to a boarding house in Neutral Bay. A very different set-up from what Neveu had expected. Potts Point or thereabouts would have been better choice. Perhaps a digression here will help to explain what would happen later in the year.

Sydney in 1938, despite an ever-increasing number of refugees from Europe, was not the cosmopolitan city it is today. In fact, England was still the mother country and our views were mainly Anglo-Saxon-Celt. After Paris, Australian boarding-house living would have been a great shock to Neveu. In Graham Kerr's opinion, to Frenchmen there was nothing like '*La Belle France*'. But for the present I will leave it at that.

Our home in Lane Cove was being renovated for future sale. My parents and nine-year old sister would soon go to live in Noumea; my brother, aged sixteen, was in his final year at school. With Muriel now married, there still remained three other daughters at home, all with jobs. Margaret worked with Kerr Bros as a typist, I worked in the Sydney Public Library as a librarian and Joyce was a governess. Margaret aged 18 would continue to live at home under the supervision of a friend who lived nearby. Young women were protected in those days and our mother had always been there to give us confidence.

It was not a good time for our mother to leave us and move to Noumea but our father's needs were greater. She was the only person who could assuage some of the mounting stress to which he was subjected. He would be 65 later in the year and, when he sold Turtle Bay plantation to French interests in 1927, the idea had been to leave the islands and direct the business from Sydney as he and his sisters were getting older. But it had not turned out that way.

With Graham Kerr in charge in Noumea, George Millar and Marcel Neveu were to be joint Sydney directors of Kerr Bros Ltd. in Sydney. Neveu was to be given a crash course before they left for Noumea and New Hebrides in early May to show him the extent of his new job.

They left from Newcastle in *Capitaine Illiaquer*, very dirty as she was taking on coal for the smelting works at Noumea. Aft over the propeller they did not have good accommodation either. I wonder what Neveu thought about that? In Noumea Graham Kerr saw the notary, Me. Rolland, about *Société Kerr/My* registration:

Ducasse has left us
much trouble through
not doing things properly.

On 14 May *Pierre Loti* arrived with Miss Agnes Kerr on board. She was Kerr Bros auditor and was going to try and

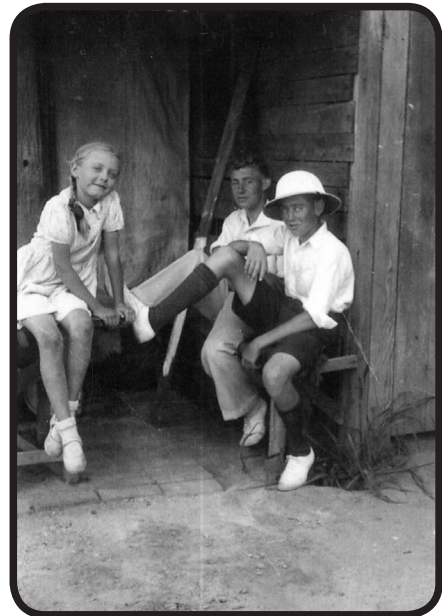


Photo 74: Tennis Court opposite Kermadec, left to right Nancy Kerr (9), David Findlay (a family friend) and Len Kerr (16). Photo provided by Len Kerr's family (Lisa and Gary Kerr) in 2018



Photo 75: September 1938, Yvonne Spence and Katherine Kerr who became close friends while working together at the State Library of New South Wales in Macquarie Street, Sydney



Photo 76: Katherine Kerr aged 21, June 1939, walking up Hunter Street on her way to work at the State Library of New South Wales in Macquarie Street, Sydney. Taken by a Street Photographer from The Leicagraph Co., 5 Strand Arcade.

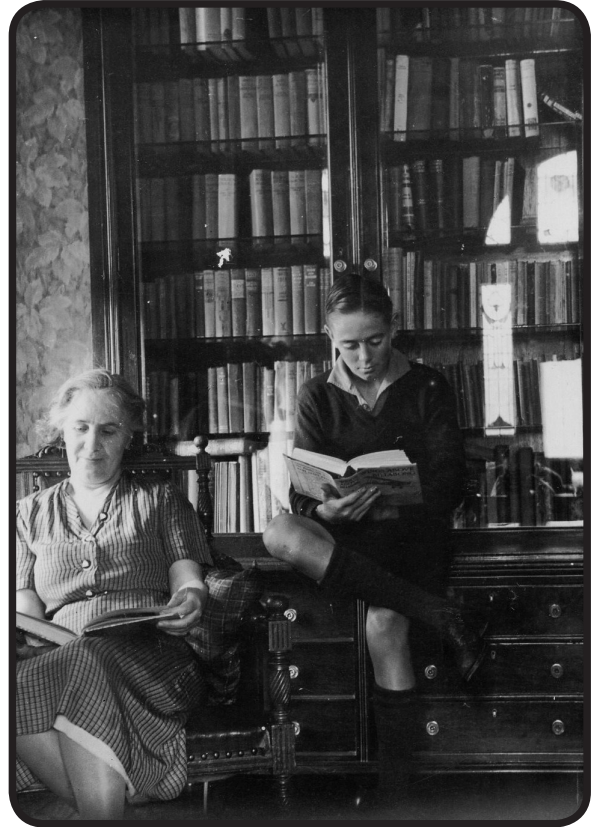


Photo 77: Len Kerr with his mother Muriel reading together at Kermadec c. 1938. Len is reading *Wings above Billabong* (publ. 1935) by Mary Grant Bruce. Her books were favourites of the Kerr family.



Photo 78: Muriel Kerr standing in the back entrance to Kermadec c. 1938

sort out *Société Kerr/My* affairs. There were interviews with Me. Rolland to 'find the best way of overcoming the problems left by Ducasse in the way he set up SK/M'. The interviews were also attended by Neveu and Guillemot, who was managing things in Noumea at that time.

The Kerr case with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* was still pending in Vila and he saw Me. Coursin, his French lawyer, with Mr Ballard before he and Neveu left for New Hebrides in *Pierre Loti* on 17 May. After a short stop in Vila they went north to Santo where he introduced Neveu to many clients at Luganville. Here they left *Pierre Loti* hoping to get away to Hog Harbour 'by some chance' which turned out to be William Anderson's launch from Hog Harbour with Jules Jocteur in charge. *Toa* had meantime been sold to the Hagens.

Jocteur had opportunely come down to Segond to the hospital with a sick Tonkinese labourer. On the way north they stopped at Naturels at Aisse who showed them great hospitality. Neveu slept ashore while my father and Jocteur occupied the launch, Naturel undoubtedly glad to have first-hand news from France. Then to Hog Harbour where Kerr noted the great improvements Jocteur had made. He left Jocteur to with Neveu while he went to see the Condominium Government Agency and they said: 'We are taking the property back at the end of 1939'. This was a piece of land at Hog Harbour leased to the Condominium by the Thomas brothers in 1913.¹³

This trip to Hog Harbour was a quick one, just to introduce Neveu, and on 27 May he and Kerr boarded *Morinda* for the trip to Vila via Aoba, Ambrym, Paama, Epi, reaching Vila on 29 May. While in Vila they visited the French Resident Commissioner, M. Casimir with whom Kerr enjoyed good relations.

Travelling in a hospital ship as no other accommodation was available he and Neveu returned to Noumea on *Maetsuycker* on 8 June where a large group of Javanese were taken off before the other passengers were allowed to land.

A large number of meetings now began with Kerr again complaining of 'bad legs' and putting it down to 'walking too much'. One meeting was with the Chief Treasurer of New Caledonia, a friend of Neveu's, and was about 40 Tonkinese labourers that they had asked for. Another was with Neveu and Guillemot to Me. Rolland who was still trying to unravel the faulty registration of *Société Kerr/My*.

As usual but particularly when under stress, Graham Kerr was a fault-finder and he took things out on Guillemot and the 'messy' way he was running the Noumea office. I can believe that Guillemot was untidy but Kerr was meticulous to a fault. He considered Guillemot and his helpers 'as having as much idea of run-

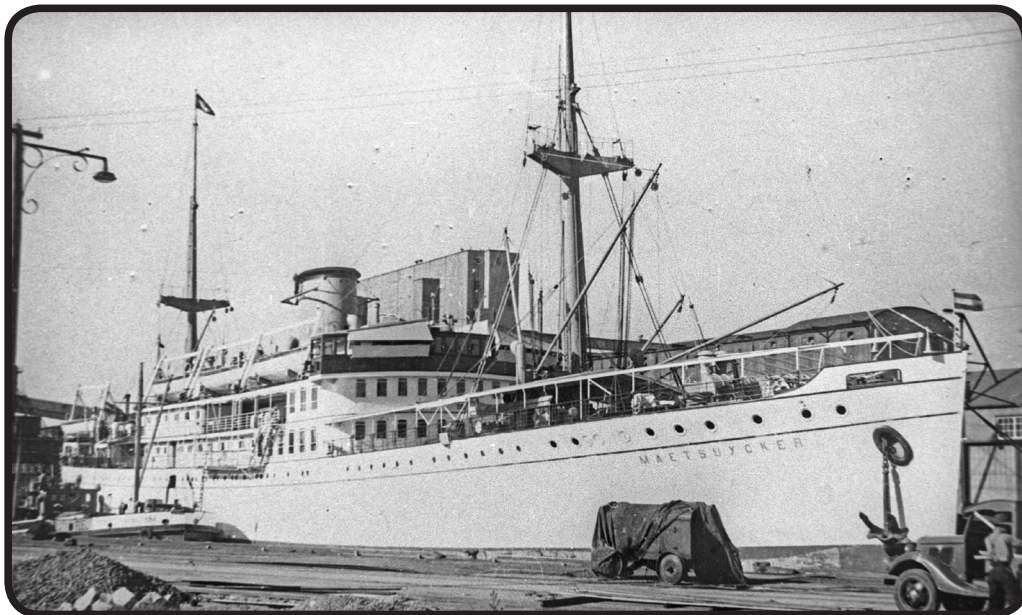


Photo 79: *Maetsuycker*, a KPM (Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij) (Netherlands) liner that served as a hospital ship in the Southwest Pacific during World War 2. From the Maritime Museum of Tasmania collection—MI53 MMT-P-CR-58429—and permission was granted to use it



Photo 80: *Maetsuycker* rigged as a hospital ship. Out of copyright from the internet but the original is part of the Allan C. Green Collection at State Library of Victoria.

ning an office as they have of jumping over the moon'. Agnes Kerr, a first-class bookkeeper, was doing her best to fix up the books that had held up the registration of *Société Kerr/My*. It would have been difficult for her to reconcile French and Australian business practice. Meantime Kerr, Neveu and Guillemot went by taxi to La Foa to visit store-keepers and coffee planters with whom there were good business prospects.

On 3 July, the day he and Neveu were to return to Sydney on *Pierre Loti*, *Strathnaver* arrived in the harbour from Sydney with about 750 tourists, followed by *Ville d'Amiens* from Marseilles via Panama with the new Governor of New Caledonia, M. Jore, on board.

Once back in Sydney Graham Kerr fixed

... a corner in the outer office for [himself] so as to let Mr Neveu have mine ... so... that he can get settled down to his regular routine in business.

He was almost crippled with back pain but insisted on playing tennis 'to try and loosen' it. Doctor's advice was not sought. He was not a restful man to be with and his wife Muriel, although she never complained, often had what she called neuralgia which I think was pure exhaustion from trying to keep up with him. Yet in his own way he loved his family. We were all he had, although he annoyed us dreadfully and his eldest children never communicated with him at all.

Despite all the trouble in France, on 20 July he and Neveu interviewed the manager of the Sydney branch of *Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris* about opening a branch in Vila. The bank was very much in favour but would have to consult headquarters in Paris. On 25 July he 'changed over to CNEP for our main banking operations'. Other than the law-suit pending with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which was always there to torment him, the ongoing problem was what to do about *Société Kerr/My*. Both the Julliens and Valette were trying to help with words of advice to Neveu who translated them for Kerr.¹⁴

On 14 September his diary noted: 'Feeling a little giddy this morning; [I] have been sticking too close and with much worry'. Also there were too many farewells.

The following day the family was to be split and uprooted as our father would leave to take up residence in Noumea with our mother and youngest sister Nancy. His brother D.H. Kerr was also leaving to see how things were going at Hog Harbour. All the family and office staff including Marcel Neveu were on the wharf as *Pierre Loti* drew away.

In Noumea he booked Muriel and Nancy into a hotel and after a brief visit to his lawyers, Me. Rolland and Marcel Coursin, he left immediately for Vila on *Pierre Loti*—celebrating, if one could call

it that, his 65th birthday, 21 September, on the way. Once in Vila he settled in at the office while Albert Jocteur went north with D.H. Kerr. From his diary it can be seen that Vila was well served with French shipping at this time. *Ville de Verdun* arrived from Marseilles on 26 September and *Polynésien* left for Wallis Island the same day.

On 27 September he wrote:

Situation in Europe very unsettled—I cannot make out why the big powers truckle to a ‘thing’ like Hitler—he wants putting in his place, but we have a pro-fascist Government.

He would meet things head-on. He was not an appeaser and, although the ‘Peace in our Time’ speech by Chamberlain after Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia staved off an immediate war, war was coming ever closer and with his close connection with France at this time this was very troubling.

On 1 October he was having more giddy turns. He even wrote that he should see a doctor but I do not believe he found the time. He had ‘very considerable running around—very tired’. In the evening he invited ‘Mr and Mrs A. Nichols, M. and Mme. Jocteur and their daughter to dinner at Mme. Reid’s’. Mr Nichols was Condominium Collector of Customs and he and his wife had ‘been very kind at different times’. He was returning their hospitality. As was always the case when more than ordinarily stressed, he found fault with the way the Vila office was being run:

It seems to be my fate to get untidy people to deal with, except Mr Neveu. Guillemot impossible; Albert Jocteur not much better; George Millar, very untidy; Ray Ball, worse. [The last two were employed at Kerr Bros. in Sydney.]. Yet they are mostly good people.

He and Albert Jocteur visited Mme. Cayrol about buying her property in the main street of Vila for an office—‘It is the best site in Vila’. He was also ‘thinking about a site for the *Comptoir National d’Escompte de Paris*’.

On 4 October he boarded *Tasman* in Vila and left for Noumea which he reached on 5 October just after *Ville de Verdun* left for Vila and *Neo-Hébridais* for Sydney, meaning that he had missed the mail in both directions but at least Muriel and Nan were there to greet him. An almost new Renault had been unloaded from *Ville de Verdun* which Kerr now bought. It would prove a boon to that over-stressed man. His first trip was to take Muriel and Nancy to see Anse Vata followed up by a trip to his old friend and partner in the disastrous plantation sale to Charles Aupied in 1927, Julius Petersen, who was also getting no benefit from the sale.

I believe if Muriel and Nancy had not been there for Graham Kerr to drive round the place and pay visits he would have broken down. School had to be arranged for Nancy and Muriel was introduced to his friends. She became very friendly at this time with Mrs Carl Johnston, sister-in-law of Willy Johnston, the British Consul.

Poor Guillemot and his messy office received a stirring-up as might be expected. On 16 October Graham Kerr

was down at the office early and put in a quiet time cleaning up ... I feel quite sure that I have discovered the untidiest man God ever made—important letters, scraps of paper, samples, catalogues, used pieces of blotting paper, notes accounts, copies of letters, bills-of-lading etc. etc. all tossed together.

Yet Kerr liked Guillemot as a person very much, but he certainly had a point in trying to run an efficient business. I wonder what Guillemot thought:¹⁵ It was Graham Kerr’s misfortune that his various businesses were widely scattered and he could not be everywhere at once. Keeping them in order was to him keeping chaos at bay and chaos and uncertainty were fast closing in round him.

On 24 October *Pierre Loti* arrived from Sydney with Agnes Kerr again on board. On 29 October the shareholders of *Société Kerr/My*, a limited company with a capital of 1,500,000 francs, met at an extraordinary general meeting. After discussion it was decided to put the company into liquidation.

G.L.S. Kerr and D.H. Kerr were to be liquidators.¹⁶ The task of putting *Société Kerr/My*'s balance sheet and accounts in order was Agnes Kerr's role as was the proceeding to set up a new company.

On 2 November Kerr, Neveu and Guillemot left Noumea for a business trip to La Foa, Bourail, Koné, and up country as far as Voh, to drum up clients and show Neveu the French colony. Then, back in Noumea, the next blow fell. In a friendly letter Marcel Neveu gave notice. He had been appointed Joint Manager with George Millar of Kerr Bros. on 14 April 1938 and Graham Kerr was impressed by him, his knowledge and his tidiness. Neveu said he found business-life alright but could not get used to ordinary everyday life in Australia and wanted to return to France at the end of January 1939.¹⁷ Perhaps in France he could continue to work as Kerr Bros. Paris agent? 1938 was the last year of a very fragile peace and with a son at school in France it was understandable that Neveu should want to return home. There is no mention in Kerr's diary of Neveu's bombshell and he, D.H. Kerr and Neveu had a meeting with Me. Rolland about the pending *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* case before Neveu, D.H. Kerr and Agnes Kerr returned to Sydney on 6 November.

Graham Kerr did write to Valette on 5 November. He thought Neveu's wish to resign

... very regrettable, as with his brilliant intellect, and his business experience and his knowledge of men, he could be a considerable factor in building up business here ... The expense of bringing him here will be a total loss. Naturally no man can grasp local conditions ... without taking considerable time to adjust his outlook ... Personally, I could not have wished for a better man.

He blamed the Julliens for not preparing the ground better and asked if a position could not be found for Neveu with them, so his Pacific experience would not be lost.

No matter how distorted his idea of life in Australia, we must respect his opinion. Unfortunately his only experience of private life there has been the usual type of Boarding House, which is not at all an example of Australian homelife.

Valette's reply came back on 23 November. He too had had a letter from Neveu. He found it:

Very uneasy to tell you how disappointed I feel ... The way in which you write to me about Mr Neveu, the way in which Mr Neveu writes to me about you, only increases my regrets and makes his decision absolutely un-understandable, unless we take into account an ailing homesickness which very often overtakes the French people residing abroad.

Valette wanted to consult his brother, Eduard who was at present in Rotterdam and had cabled him to get in touch with Louis Vautier who had once worked for Kerr Bros. and now lived in Paris.

Valette wrote on 1 December about the seeming bad feeling that now existed between the Kerrs and their French allies in Marseilles. It boiled down to the advice they with the help of their lawyer had given Graham Kerr about setting up *Société Kerr/My*. He thought the main question was to change the company's nationality and thus avoid providing grounds for a dispute over the nationality of the new company. *Société Kerr/My*, as East Santo Plantations, had been registered in Australia

Valette thought that the advice they had given 'was good but not suitably followed'. As for the proposed new company, the Julliens wanted to increase their share-holding to make up for Neveu's share withdrawal. They wanted to provide the company with new lines of merchandise.

We have handy all the Ballandes' and Barrau's suppliers; they call on us twice a week. I fail to see why we cannot compete with these people.

A note of impatience creeps in—Kerr had earlier mentioned amalgamation with Gubbay Bros who were cash-strapped. Jullien asked:

Don't you think it is advisable to get a real start of a serious business with *Kerr/My* before thinking of refloating a competitor?

In his reply on 31 December, Kerr did not back down. He readily recognised

... that you had the best intentions ... and only wanted to help us. Unfortunately it failed ... Unfortunately, we did not know conditions and ways of business at your end, and likewise you do not know them at our end.

In those days of very slow communication—the world was certainly not the global village it is today—and because neither man was fluent in the other's language communication was difficult. As regards Gubbay Bros, Kerr had asked Neveu to explain but Valette had entirely misunderstood. It was a

... well-established business, now labouring under great disability from want of working capital Obtaining working capital from France would not be refloating a competitor in any shape or form—it would be adding a very valuable buying and selling business to our undertakings. I now expect they will be snapped up by Ballandes. [He emphasised that] we have no idea of entering into competition with Ballandes or Barraus in carrying all kinds of stock. Neither would you, if you looked over some of the stock that has been lying in Ballandes store for many years.

Being on the spot, and also serving clients to their satisfaction through Kerr Bros. Ltd in Sydney for many years, Graham Kerr did know what he was talking about.

The year ended with the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* case still pending and Graham Kerr still having 20 'bearer' shares of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* which he had earlier 'sold' to the Julliens, in a box in Marseilles at *Comptoir National d'Escompte*. Following the writ of seizure Julliens could not open it.

It was now arranged that on Marcel Neveu's return to France, Graham Kerr would give him a letter to the bank empowering him to pay lease expenses and close the box after removing the shares. In that way the Julliens would not be implicated. A letter written in French was enclosed for Graham Kerr to be copied and for Neveu to sign. With *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* all precautions had to be taken.

Our parents and youngest sister were now resident in Noumea and Graham Kerr was losing no time landing goods from France via *Eridan* for customers and trying to set up another business in Noumea like Kerr Bros in Sydney. He knew what people wanted and all these goods were soon purchased. He loved cars and the Renault meant he could also take Muriel and Nancy and their growing group of friends to Anse Vata beach and other places. So life seemed more or less normal. On 10 November there was a torchlight procession to celebrate Armistice Day and the next day my parents with the Guillemots attended a Ball at the Hotel de Ville.

On 19 November he managed to rent a furnished cottage called *Les Palmiers* at Orphelinat so they were settling in, or at least Muriel Kerr and Nancy were. Graham Kerr after, after giving evidence at the *Tribunal* at an enquiry into the affairs of Ducasse who had been responsible for the non-registration of *Société Kerr/My*, left for Vila on 24 November on *Pierre Loti* with Muriel and Nancy to see him off.

It was not long before he fell out with Albert Jocteur, who was in charge of the Vila office—'he was away all morning soon after 8 am on his own affairs'. Jocteur was dismissed on 29 November. On 2 December he saw Des Granges with T.C. Ballard his lawyer and arranged for him to hand over all authority to Ballard in the matter of *Société Kerr/My* land-claims. This was necessary as Aupied was trying to grab Hog Harbour Plantation. After rushing to get through business Kerr left on *Tasman* for Noumea on 5 December—'Mighty glad to be out of Vila'. The ship had to lie in mid-stream for two hours when they arrived while Javanese labourers were being landed at Île Nou.

It did not take long for him to find trouble with incompetent office management in Noumea:

The bureau is very slack, with no goods to sell ... [everything he managed to import, was immediately sold], and Guillemot has no initiative in looking for orders although he is as willing as they make them.

After the perpetual bustle of the Sydney office, Noumea was a great contrast.

On 17 December he made an appointment to see M. Gayon who had just arrived from France on *Ville d'Amiens*. Kerr thought the latter was still on the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides Conseil* but Gayon said 'he would not have anything to do with it while Aupied is on the Board'. So why was Aupied permitted to occupy the position? Why was he permitted to persecute Graham Kerr when his proclivities were so well known?

On 20 December Kerr prepared mail for Vila. Henri Ohlen was given full authority to take over from Albert Jocteur and put René Pujol in charge in Jocteur's place. My father 'was feeling down, as [there] seems a tremendous amount of work and not much to show for it'. If ever a man needed a grown-up family of sons to help in the business, he did.

However his only son, Len, aged sixteen was about to arrive from Sydney for a short holiday. This was his first trip abroad. My mother would at least have two of her children with her at Christmas. The rest of us were to spend our first one alone at Kermadec. On 30 December our father, mother and a very excited Nancy climbed Ouen Toro to watch for the *Neo-Hébridais* which they sighted coming in from the Light House.

There was one piece of good news before the year ended. Kerr and Guillemot called in on the Noumea directors of Ballandes. 'The bandits in Paris do not seem to be working well with Ballandes so I am hoping to open [their] eyes a little'. The firm of Ballandes with its headquarters in Bordeaux had a permanent seat on the *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris.

On the last day of the year he took his family to Anse Vata in the Renault and in the evening into town, where there was a Fancy Dress Ball at the Town Hall. He admitted to being 'rather tired, so did not stay up to see the old year out. It has not been a very good one anyway with the world in the grip of large combines, savages and dictators'.

Also his case with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to decide whether the French Court was competent to try him, a British subject, was inexplicably still pending. Why did the British Judge at the Joint Court in Vila not act?

Graham Kerr certainly did not have much to be happy about.

Endnotes

- 1 'Il ne nous reste plus maintenant qu'à nous armer de patience'. For copy of the Defence put by Me. Seneque (Maître Seneque) to the *Tribunal de Commerce* on 31 Jan 1938 and letter Valette to Kerr 8 Feb see Valette letter file, Black Envelope 3. All Valette letters are included in this file.
- 2 The letter included mention of Santo being an outlet for a colonising scheme. It must be remembered that at this time colonisation was not yet generally regarded as a 'dirty' word. I feel that when the French government decreed—in return for yet another financial bail-out—that no more SFNH agricultural development work was to go on in the New Hebrides, it was trying to rid its self of the whole ongoing SFNH mess, by selling or leasing the valuable properties that my father was trying so hard to develop and make pay for the sake of other shareholders whose whole investment was at stake. What would be good for the French part of the Condominium did not figure in French Government reasoning in Paris: only trying to avoid any suggestion of culpability for the financial rorts carried out by Aupied and his group amongst whom were some Parliamentary high-up members.
- 3 It still held 20 bearer shares bought by the Julliens earlier so that they could represent my father at any suddenly called SFNH meeting of shareholders.
- 4 The paragraphs from Valette's letters given in quotation marks are rough translations from the French.
- 5 See Valette letter-file under 27 July 1938 when the *Tribunal* was finally forced to decide the case in Valette's favour. Here can be found the specious arguments of SFNH to make it a question of preventing a foreign power, in fact my father, from taking over a French company controlled by the French government.
- 6 See Clarence letter file, SFNH Matters Folder in chron. order.
- 7 I feel that the inclusion of Raoul-Duval in the seizure writ was to show 'open-mindedness' on Aupied's part. My father knew from experience that the Raoul-Duval company was an enemy and he refused to use it as an agent, only Julliens of Marseilles.
- 8 I found a copy of the letter in English signed by the Registrar General. R.W. Willis and dated 1 March 1938 in the *Outre Mer* Archives in Paris in 1983. See 71 *APC. SFNH. Serie II Affaire Kerr*. See also letter Ballard to Kerr, 25 April 1938, in Ballard Letter File.
- 9 See *Outre Mer* Archives. *APC. SFNH. Serie II*, No. 116, *Affaire Kerr*. This also includes the following two references.
- 10 The tree count and its refutation by my father comes up with monotonous regularity in his own papers. At first I thought it was just a sign of the persecution mania he understandably developed during the long years this case went on. Now I think differently. The case would not have been finally abandoned in 1956 if he had not confounded his persecutors by resolutely going back and back, with written evidence to what had really happened, which the French Court in Noumea was finally forced to acknowledge, and which SFNH's Paris lawyers had concealed from its lawyers in Noumea.
- 11 Pierre Laval, the man thought to be behind Aupied, had been Minister for Colonies when the case against my father started.
- 12 G.L.S. Kerr to Valette 31 Dec 1938. See Valette Letter File in chronological order.
- 13 See letter signed by H. Sautot and G. Joy to G.L.S. Kerr, 29 Nov 1937 in White Envelope 1, and letter, B.C. Ballard to Kerr 26 May 1938, in Ballard Letter File.
- 14 See Black Envelope No. 3, Valette Letter File. Letters dated 6 and 9 Sept 1938.
- 15 I feel for him. As children we used to dread it when father inspected the play-boxes where we kept our toys. If they were untidy—as they always were when he was not around—we were lectured that we would never get through life without a system.
- 16 It was officially announced that this would happen in *Le Bulletin du Commerce*, Noumea 12 Oct 1938. See White Envelope 1, SK/M Papers.
- 17 See Black Envelope No.1, Neveu Letter File. Neveu to Kerr 3 Nov 1938. 'At the time of my departure from France, I expected to find in Australia an average standard of life equivalent to that on the Continent. As far as my personal connection with the Messrs Kerr Bros. Ltd is concerned, I must say at once that from the beginning, I have been more than satisfied with assistance and courtesy extended to me. Unfortunately outside the business activity, I have to admit that the material conditions of existence, re accommodation, home-life organisations, domestic labour, etc. are so widely different from those available on the Continent that I cannot possibly see my way to settling down in Australia ... I have made every possible effort to bridge the gap but simply could not get over it'.

Chapter 21 1939: Nothing is Settled in the *Société* versus Kerrs — and Europe at War

From the beginning of 1939 a certain coolness in relations between Graham Kerr and his friends in France, the Julliens and Valette is noticeable. I feel that mutual incomprehension was the problem, not aided by Neveu's short sojourn in the Pacific arena. Julliens' import and export agency in Marseilles had its main markets just across the Mediterranean in French North Africa, far away from the new ones it was attempting to cultivate in Oceania, which were not nearly as big or as advanced as the ones they knew. Also shipping to and from France to the Pacific was slow and unreliable—bad news to a firm that required rapid transit for goods on order.

Valette in a letter to Kerr 5 January 1939 wrote

... we started export business with ... Senegal and French Sudan ... at the same time [as] we did with you and we have already made good headway and regular business has been established. We cannot say that the same result has been reached in the Pacific Islands ... No doubt it comes from the remoteness of the place and the slow character of the mails and from the difficulties of the New Caledonian market.¹

He had no idea of the problems Graham Kerr was facing, being forced to travel all the time between Sydney, New Caledonia and the New Hebrides. Kerr was a British subject and non-French speaker although he could understand what was said to him and was now resident in Noumea. Kerr Bros in Sydney was being reorganised under the joint management of George Millar and Marcel Neveu, although Neveu had recently resigned.²

Kerr was also trying to turn an Australian-registered company, East Santo Plantations, into a French one, *Société Kerr/My* in Noumea. Its initial registration had been mishandled by the notary Ducasse. The threat of the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* lawsuit was hanging in the balance while the competence of the French court was being decided.

Often too Graham Kerr did not get letters until months after they were written, so erratic was the mail and shipping service and his own itinerary. After the resignation of Neveu, he thought if Neveu was employed by the Julliens in Marseilles in connection with business from Oceania there would be better understanding of conditions there. But the Julliens did not intend to employ him. Graham Kerr, trusting George Millar now in sole charge of Kerr Bros in Sydney, told Valette that he

... is an entirely reliable young man, and has our full confidence and I would ask you to write to him as you would to one of ourselves. You see, I am out of touch for periods when I have to be away in the Islands.³

On 18 March he wrote to Valette that he had been away from Sydney since September 1938 and communication between Noumea and Sydney was very disorganised by months of delay in Saigon by *Messageries Maritimes*'s *Pierre Loti*, which left Sydney in November 1938 and 'is only just back to Noumea from Indo-China now'. He again stressed that George Millar, a shareholder in the firm can

be trusted as 'one of ourselves'. He also tried to explain the business environment under which he laboured:

Re general business matters we are very slow getting well established. The shipping service between here and France is a poor one ... We are slow in getting good connections particularly with Indo-China.

He had hoped that Neveu would have been useful for establishing this connection but he had not been successful. The Julliens were naturally keen to get bulk orders but

... we have ... no idea of keeping many lines of stock on hand ... [just] keep bulk lines of everyday requirements ... Certainly in the inaugural stage of business in Noumea and Vila, with irregular supplies, and no supplies at all, through want of shipping facilities, it is certain that the margin between landed cost and selling price would not cover office expenses.

He explained that he had had to place a new manager, René Pujol, in the new office in Vila.

Please understand that I am working 7 days a week and often 16 hours a day and without any salary until this thing is worked up. My sister (thoroughly competent) comes down [from Sydney] at balancing period to help me (she drawing no salary either), we so want to get settled and going properly.

He thought that Vila where they had a Customs Agency for their clients should soon come good:

Naturally there is more scope in New Caledonia ... but there are pitfalls; but with careful handling a very big business can be worked up. People are coming in to consult us more and more and the name [Kerr] carries considerable weight—being known in the Islands for so long.

We are waiting for constitution of the Company to make proper publicity. Up to date we have not had sufficient stock arriving regularly and having been only in temporary premises and, having to attend to Vila as well, we have not been able to push out after business as we should.

We are doing fair business in Trochus for the Sydney market (which is much better than France at present), and also for goods from Sydney ... We ship Trochus and Hides to Sydney, *Café* and Copra to France. When we get settled in a permanent place, we shall probably buy Trochus; grade it, and ship it to Japan, which is the best market. We are trying to get the agency for handling Fuel Essences and Oils in Noumea and Vila, as there is a new shipping line from America calling here

He had tried to get an agency for cement in Indo-China but found it 'tied to the Ballande and Barrau firms' so they were trying Java for supplies from there. They had now moved into new premises in Noumea at the corner of *Rue de la République* and *Rue Austerlitz* 'close to the main Government offices, the Treasury, Ballandes and the main business centre'. It was part of the Mas estate and could not be sold at the present but they had it on long lease at nominal rent. Mr Jean Mas, one of the three representatives of the Estate, was taking shares in the new company and was also offered a job. Kerr preferred 'taking into any important service those with some financial interest in the concern'. He said 'the most annoying delay [is] in the proper constitution of the Company' for which there seemed to be no reason: 'always procrastination'.

He was 'beginning to wonder if there [was] anything behind the procrastination' and, writing many years later, I share his concern. 'Our Notary here, Me. Rolland, represents the big interests of the Bank of Indo-China and Ballandes' and Ballandes had a permanent seat on the *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Paris. This was formidable opposition. There may also have been influence from

Aupied and his henchman, Vibert, as they were hell-bent on seizing any possessions of the Kerrs they could lay their hands on should the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* versus Kerr case would be judged in Aupied's favour. And Aupied was in no way prepared to lose.

Graham Kerr begged Valette not

... to run away with the idea that a business in these places is in any way on the same plane as in the Metropolis, where you have large populations. Never-the-less it can be quite important ... There are Australian Companies operating in the Pacific in trading and plantations whose one pound shares are worth two to three pounds, and paying fair dividends ... We are not to the dividend stage yet, but with proper handling ... there is no reason why we should not get [there]...

To cover a good field we must have Noumea [as HQ]; the plantation at Santo; [agency] in Vila; and [in] Sydney [Kerr Bros Ltd], all working for a common success.

An office at Second Channel, Santo was also needed.

Then we want the right connections overseas: Julliens in France: a good firm in Indo-China: supplies from Java, Holland, India, Hong-Kong, Japan, and perhaps a few lines from England, America and Germany.

He sent this letter by air from Noumea and noted that a 'private flyer, on his way to France, will connect at Brisbane with the regular service from Australia'.⁴ He was also sending another copy by sea route to Sydney to be sent on by air mail from there.

Another letter written on 2 April showed the competition the new firm would be up against once it was constituted. Ballandes, which ran the *Messageries Maritimes* shipping agency, certainly did not want the Marseilles firm of Julliens taking any of its customers.⁵ This included Marc Cariou at Port Sandwich, for one.⁶ He used to do business with Kerr Bros Sydney but then struck a financial set-back. He was helped out by Ballandes and Barraus. Now he was tied to these two firms and Graham Kerr wondered whether Julliens had friends in Marseilles who could back him in return for him exporting all his produce to them.

The Bank of Indo-China [BIC] in Noumea was dead against the proposed new firm as well. They were close to Ballandes at Noumea with its headquarters in Bordeaux. The Kerrs dealt with *Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris* with whom they were at present in consultation to get a branch of that bank set up in Vila which would not please BIC. Ballandes, despite refusing to help Des Granges track down its business dealings with Kerr Bros Ltd Sydney, would not welcome competition from the new company, as a rumour to the detriment of Julliens will later reveal.

Regarding *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, Kerr

... could not stress too much the importance of their holdings in New Hebrides. Ballandes are trying to get control. The reason for the shares going down to next to nothing is the scandalous management. The properties still remain. [Underlined in the original.]

This would be the reason why Aupied was having difficulties with Ballandes in Paris. In fact strange things were taking place in Paris. These showed that Aupied was up against the new *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* that was not seeing things his way.

While in Vila in late February February had been given a circular about a *Comité de Défense des Actionnaires* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* dated Paris September 1938. A committee to protect the rights of shareholders of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would have immediately attracted his attention. On 9 March he wrote off to Valette:

I might say that in 1932–1933 I wrote to many of the *Actionnaires* trying to get some combination to protect the interests of the shareholders against the way the *Conseil* was

carrying on. I had very little response. Now, unfortunately they are late in the day in making a move—many years late.

He again spoke of his fixed ideas of what the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* plantations in the New Hebrides could become under proper management. An idea completely at variance with what the faction of the French government behind Aupied had stipulated back in 1934 when it bailed the bankrupt company out of its difficulties. No further agricultural development, only lease or sale. Too late, other shareholders had rallied round André Joyer and the faction supporting him, hoping that Graham Kerr could save the day for them. To Kerr it was never too late. He said, actually 'there is tremendous value, but a very false situation has arisen from maladministration'.

I believe that from the very beginning Aupied, an astute stockbroker with no agricultural experience, had the sale of the plantations on the Stock Exchange in mind to provide a good kick-back for himself and his supporters.⁷ To him, and the Government faction that supported him, shareholders who expected appreciation in value of their shares from agricultural production were of no account.

His hopes raised, Kerr wanted Valette to get in touch with the *Comité de Défense*. Perhaps 'we can haul something from the fire'. He had concluded that 'there is considerable cash in hand, which the *Comité* wish to protect from the squanderings of *Conseil*'⁸

Valette, in France, thought differently. His case with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* about the disputed shares was still on appeal so he could not attend *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* Meetings as a shareholder. 'Contrary to what you think, I believe there is very little money in the bank.' In the *Comité* circular, sent to Valette by Kerr, something like 40F value per share was suggested. Valette said,

'I will certainly put myself in touch with this *Comité*, but I must await the conclusion of the lawsuit before taking this decision'.

An Extraordinary Meeting of the shareholders of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had been called and Valette was awaiting

... a reply from Mr Joyer to some questions I put to him some time ago as to the exact reason for the ... Meeting.

... I have good reason to believe that the *Comité* ... referred to in the circular you sent me is in reality a scheme set up by Mr Aupied to combat the actions of the new *Conseil* of SFNH from which he is excluded.⁹

And he was not wrong, as a letter written on 26 May revealed.

Our enquiries on the subject of the *Comité de Défense des Actionnaires* has confirmed our first impression. The [contact] address ... is that of the banker M. Jameau and [he] is in close relationship with Mr Aupied; it is thus a combination of Mr Aupied against the new *Conseil* SFNH.

Meanwhile Graham Kerr had heard that Jules Repiquet had been appointed as Director of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*.¹⁰ 'He was one time Governor of New Caledonia and High Commissioner for New Hebrides and had a very good reputation in these parts. I have met him personally, but only in a casual way'. Previous to that, Repiquet had been French Resident Commissioner in Vila, maintaining very good relations with his British colleague Merton King. If he, with his knowledge of the New Hebrides, was in charge of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* at last there might be hope.

'The best part of the New Hebrides Group, including a considerable portion of the township of Vila, belongs to SFNH.'¹¹ Some of it being the erstwhile Kerr Brothers Store and Kerr Brothers House behind it that was part of the property deal to CFNH made by Graham Kerr in 1927.

Kerr thought Neveu knew Repiquet. Perhaps Repiquet could be approached that way? He told Valette that while he was in Vila on 20 April, *Eridan* had arrived from France with a new local Director of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on board, Commander Harelle, who had 'previously been stationed at Noumea and has the reputation of being a just man'.¹² The situation seems much improved from the Aupied/Raoul-Duval/Vibert combination and Harelle was replacing Vibert.

On 2 June Kerr told Valette that the old *Société Kerr/My* had been dissolved on 26 April and a new one of the same name would be in existence on 30 June, except it would now be a *Responsabilité Limitée*, not an *Société Anonyme*.¹³ He wanted to know whether the Julliens wanted to take shares in it as in the previous one and he told him of their new permanent headquarters.

He also reported that at last things were moving in the case to prove the competency of the French court to hear his case with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. Me. Marcel Coursin, his Lawyer in Noumea, had asked the Court to produce the final transfer-of-sale executed under the seal of Kerr Bros. Ltd on 11 October 1928:

Opposing counsel professed to having not heard of it. A telegram was sent to Paris, and the document is supposed to be coming by Air Mail due in Sydney in early June. When it is received in Noumea the appeal will come on. That document should knock out French jurisdiction in the case. The transfer under the seal of Kerr Bros. Ltd was demanded at the time by the Company [*Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*], and it was prepared in English by our solicitor [Wallace] in Vila, agreed to by the Company's solicitor [Me. Joseph-Marc Coursin], and then sent to Sydney for execution by K.B. Ltd. This was all done in a proper way ... I think SFNH would like to find a way out without being hit too heavily for damages'.¹⁴

The Julliens were still having difficulties with the set-up of the new *Société Kerr/My* and what its paid-up capital would be:

Business is really difficult and there are good prospects only for Firms who will adjust their business with their means.

In a letter dated 25 April (really 25 May), Valette was frank. He thought Kerr was being too optimistic despite his explanations.

The Neveu resignation was still an annoyance. Messrs Caillard and Houchard¹⁵ had been given introductions to the Julliens by Kerr for their forthcoming visit to Marseilles and Kerr did not think it advisable that they meet up with Neveu with whom they had probably had unfortunate contact during his short visits to the New Hebrides.¹⁶

It seems that France had no more understanding of her nationals in the Condominium of New Hebrides than did England of hers. Kerr was frank with Valette to whom he thought Neveu was giving wrong advice. He said:

Business prospects were bright... We are firmly convinced that a very profitable business can be worked up in all places in which we are established.

The Julliens—probably from what Neveu had told them of some minor employee of the new company only contributing 100F in shares—had been worried that the new company had not sufficient capital. Far from it wrote Kerr:

It is my belief and also of many business houses here with large capital, that it is a good thing to give a small interest to employees who have proved themselves.

Let me point out we are not mushrooms of a day. The Kerr group (and their uncle Captain Macleod before them) have been in these places for very many years. We have never done anyone out of a sou, so please adjust your minds to straightforward dealings

as far as we are concerned. Naturally it is for you to say what you take part in, or what you do not take part in.

Straightforward honest dealing was basic to Kerr Bros and to have it even hinted that this might not be the case, caused deep hurt. In his reply on 1 August Valette attempted to heal the wound he had unintentionally inflicted.¹⁷ Neveu, he wrote, had for Graham Kerr and all his family the best of memories and would not hesitate to be of service if the occasion arose. His own 'very sensitive case' with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* about the share ownership was still not settled but he thought it would be heard before the end of the year. He had met the French settlers from New Hebrides, Houchard and Caillard, both of whom had left a very good impression.

As for the future of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* he

... remained convinced that there is nothing to hope for. The agreements with the Government are such that SFNH can no longer undertaking anything. It can only sell or rent its properties.

He did not see how re-entry into production as Graham Kerr was suggesting, could liquidate *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides'* debts and pay anything to shareholders. He wondered if the arrival of Commander Harelle to replace Vibert could bring about change. As far as business with Julliens was concerned, things were due to get very much more difficult before the year ended. When Valette wrote this letter the invasion of Poland by Hitler followed by the declaration of the Second World War was only a month away. Hitler and Mussolini had already formed an alliance early in 1939.

On 7 December Kerr told Julliens that *Sagittaire* arrived in Noumea. 'The first M.M. boat from Europe for 3 months—we had a cargo on board that was shipped from Marseilles by the *Eridan* in August'.¹⁸ This was bad news for a person trying to set up a trading company in Noumea and also bad news for Julliens—its chief European supplier in Marseilles.

I will now return to Leon Vibert's efforts on behalf of Aupied to get the trial of Graham Kerr up and running in Noumea.

In Paris at a meeting of the new *Conseil* of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, the report of Corbin de Mangoux, made after an inspection of the French plantations in New Hebrides in 1929 was mentioned.¹⁹ In it he praised Kerr Bros. Ltd which did not fit in with the accusations made against them. On the contrary, Corbin de Mangoux had a poor opinion of Charles Aupied, who misdirected things from Paris, and of Vibert, Aupied's man-on-the-spot, for his repeated absences, lack of knowledge, lack of interest and continual fault-finding with the experienced managers of these plantations. This would not be what Aupied wanted to hear and would be yet another piece of incriminating evidence to be hidden away.

On 20 March Me. Marcel Coursin acting for the Kerrs before the *Tribunal Supérieur d'Appel de Noumea* made a very strong case that the fantastic demand of the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* for costs and damages against the Kerrs could not legally rest on the Act of Sale signed by G.L.S. Kerr for Kerr Bros. Ltd. and Antoine Audoin for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on 28 August 1928. Here follows a shortened version of his plea:

In reality a short time after signature, the buyers [*Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*], questioned the Power of Attorney of Mr Kerr which had expired according to English law, not having been used for a year.

A new contract was drawn up by Me. Frank Wallace, English lawyer at Port Vila. That contract called a Conveyance, was drawn up 11 October 1928 in a purely English form and signed by the vendors by the Seal of Kerr Bros. Ltd and Mr G. Kerr, and for the purchasers in Port Vila, by Antoine Audoin. It was only then that the purchasers paid the rest of the money owing.

A copy of this Act of Conveyance which definitely regularised the sale, was registered at the British Residence under No. 1/28, Folio 50. Thus the sale in question is purely an

English act, transferring real estate by a British firm subjected to British Authority and determined solely under the rules of British law.

Such cases under Condominium law had to be tried before the Joint Court according to the law of the Defendant, whether he be British or French.

In English law an option or promise of sale, even if it is followed by an acceptance in the time agreed, is not considered to be sold in a case of real estate until confirmed by an act of transfer [Conveyance] otherwise the agreement is a 'dead letter'.

For all these reasons Me. Coursin thought that the French court in Vila was not competent to hear the law suit of 23 February 1936 brought on by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* against Kerr Bros. Ltd and Mr G.L.S. Kerr, which completely nullifies the Judgment of 18 November 1937.

Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides was condemned to pay all costs and damages. Under all reserves, the plea signed by M. Coursin.²⁰

On the very same day Me. Rousselot, acting for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, had received a telegram from Paris about consultation between Professor Hamel and Me. René Lafarge, specialist in English law. After reading it Rousselot said that he had serious reason to believe it better to defer action until a solution had been found to the real background of the case. He followed this up with a letter to L. Vibert, Director General of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, Santo dated 27 March 1939. At this stage Vibert had not been replaced by Harelle.

After listening to Coursin's arguments for the Kerrs, Rousselot was deeply distressed that he had to disagree with the information he had received from Paris

... the debate presently submitted to the jurisdiction of the Appeal court bears on the question of competence; it is a matter of knowing which of the tribunals, French or English, has the right to judge the Kerr case.

He was convinced, now more than ever, that if heard before the English Court

... our case would almost certainly be lost....The obstinacy of the Kerrs in insisting on their claim that the French Judge is legally unable to sit on the matter, shows clearly what they hope to be able to obtain from an English Judge.

The Joint Court, the only court that could legally hear the case, seems to have been left out of the argument by both parties. Perhaps it was not sitting?

The French case was based on an Act of Sale dated 28 August, 1928 but after Me. Marcel Coursin's plea before the Court of Appeal on 20 March, Rousselot heard for the first time of the contract, 'purely English in form' drawn up 11 October 1928 and registered on 1 November 1928 at the British Residency in Vila, which has been substituted for the one of 28 August. Coursin could only give Rousselot an undated copy of the 11 October Conveyance but would provide a proper one from Vila.

Rousselot did not hide his stupefaction from Vibert. He had never before seen the document of 11 October. This, he said, seriously upsets the points brought up by Professor Hamel and other points he himself had intended to add to them. He pointed out that the final sentence (written in English) of the 11 October Act of Conveyance 'it is agreed that this indenture shall be read and construed according to English law' which he found 'terribly embarrassing'. Nevertheless he assured Vibert that he 'would do the impossible ... for the defence of your case'. He would write immediately to Me. Des Granges in Vila for any useful information and if possible for the complete dossier of our case.

He asked Vibert whether he should delay placing *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* conclusions before the Court of Appeal until he received new instructions from Paris.²¹

On 29 March headquarters in Paris told Vibert in an 'absolutely confidential' letter, that it agreed with Professor Hamel and they were just waiting for the case to return to the French Court in Noumea. In spite of Des Granges letter of 9 October 1933 that the Kerrs no longer owned any property in the

New Hebrides and resulting from the consultation with Professor Hamel, Rousselot was to lodge a caveat in the hands of the liquidator of *Société Kerr/My*.²² Des Granges was asked for a list of its shareholders and other Kerr properties and all legal measures were to be used. To Paris or Aupied, this was a case which must be followed ‘very closely’ and which ‘we must win’.

On 23 May Rousselot received a letter from Paris with documents showing him why the ‘Act called “Conveyance” of 11 October 1928 was set up’, but the letter did not include a copy of the 11 October Conveyance itself.

The Deed-of-Sale of 28 August 1928 was the one on which registration of sales tax was paid.

The Act of 11 October was only a simple confirmation of the Act of 28 August... In spite of the insistence of the Kerrs and their lawyer, Mr Wallace, neither the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* nor its representatives in Noumea and Vila, Commander Audoin and Me. Coursin [Père], ever accepted the substitution of the Act of 11 October for the Act of 28 August.²³

It goes without saying that the documents we are sending you are only to be used and produced as you think fit to defend our point of view.²⁴

What really happened in 1928 was *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* refused to pay the balance of the money owing, 1186 pounds, for the property sale because Kerr’s Power of Attorney had expired. Kerr, himself, wanted a new document drawn up as he found that the first sale document mentioned properties included mistakenly by Wallace.

Why did Audoin for *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* sign the new one drawn up officially under the Seal of Kerr Bros at the British Residence, with the final payment only then be made, if it was not the legal one? Wallace himself told the French that they should now destroy the 28 August one or give it to the Kerrs to destroy.

The answer was that the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, which took over *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 1930, did not destroy the document. Paris wanted Rousselot to keep these documents confidential because they were based on untenable grounds. He and Vibert were to cooperate to out-manoeuvre the Kerr plan of attack.

On 15 June Rousselot acknowledged receipt of the above.²⁵ He had been in touch with Des Granges, and told him that he had never seen the Conveyance of 11 October in the Vila dossier of papers. He said,

I am literally put out of countenance by this production of a deed of which I have never heard the vaguest mention and which Professor Hamel had certainly never laid eyes on.

Des Granges told him that Me. Joseph-Marc Coursin, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*’s lawyer, had been the one to raise the question of the expiry of Graham Kerr’s Power of Attorney. This does not fit in with Joseph-Marc Coursin’s supposed acceptance with Audoin—who signed the 11 October document at the British Residence—that the document signed on 28 August was the only legal one.

Indeed the money owing to the Kerrs was paid over by Me. Joseph-Marc Coursin to Wallace with a receipt dated 1 November 1928 which Deed of Conveyance was registered at the British Residence under No. 1/12 Folio 50, making it a transaction under British law, not French law.

Rousselot told Paris that Des Granges had known all this since 1937—‘How could he tell me on 15 May 1939 that he did not know about it?’ Rousselot did not want the situation to continue because of the ridicule and because of the damage that could result for the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* from it. He wrote all this in confidence.

Despite such strong evidence to the contrary, the Court of Appeal at Noumea on 26 September, probably acting on Professor Hamel’s advice with which Rousselot had disagreed, announced that the French Court at Vila was competent to try the case. Rousselot and Des Granges were to bring it on immediately.

There was mention of a further retaining fee for their services of 20,000F being placed in the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine*, bringing the money already paid to 62,500 F,

... without mentioning the amounts which Me. Des Granges has received directly for our local Director in the New Hebrides to cover the initial costs”.

On 6 October headquarters in Paris told Vibert's successor, Harelle, that his intervention with Rousselot and Des Granges would safeguard the interests of our company, *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. The case was completely controlled from Paris.²⁶

Rousselot was cabled that he was to put out an immediate distraint order on the Kerr properties, despite the fact that Des Granges had told them that nothing could be done in the matter. ‘Whatever happens, our case must not fail on the fact of it being a dead letter’. Headquarters notified its lawyers that 150,000F had been sent to register the judgement. ‘In any case it will have to be paid by the Kerrs following the decree of the Noumea Court.’

Des Granges on 6 December reassured his colleague in Noumea, Me. Rousselot, that he had absolutely no intention of resigning his brief.

Concerning the *Kerr/My* dossier, I am in a worse position than you in that I have no dossier concerning this company which has its headquarters in Noumea.

He had been notified from Paris on 28 September of the ruling of competence to try the case ‘but we are still a long way from the final goal’. He needed the dossier regarding *Société Kerr/My* as soon as possible so he could again start proceedings before the French Tribunal in Vila.²⁷

Just how two-faced were Des Grange's dealings with Kerr and *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* is revealed in the ‘strictly confidential’ letter he sent to Harelle the newly appointed Director-General of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in Vila on 9 December.²⁸

I am unable to fix the figure of my fees at the present time; it is customary both in New Caledonia and here that they are 10% of the amount recovered, after the final ruling, but there is room for fearing that the SFNH cannot, whatever the outcome, recoup the expenses of the trial and registration fees ... because in my opinion the Kerrs offer no opening. This is no secret from anyone.²⁹

My opinion from the start of this business has been that this law suit should not be undertaken, not only because of the considerable expense ... but also because I estimate that even by putting things in their best light, we can only hope to obtain ‘platonic’ [which I interpret to mean non-financial] satisfaction from it.

He revealed Vibert's part in bringing the original accusation back in 1936 and that the Vibert had written to Aupied in Paris

... that I, Des Granges—was the Kerrs' lawyer and on the best of terms with them and that it was probable that I was acting out of interest in advising SFNH not to engage in a lawsuit.

He denied the accusation. ‘I have never been the lawyer of the Kerrs who have always had as their lawyer Me. Marcel Coursin of Noumea’. He then wrote that his attitude to the case was embarrassing to ‘the motives which decided a certain administrator of the SFNH to pursue [the scheme]’. He meant Leon Vibert whom Kerr had openly denounced as being utterly incapable of doing the job that he was being overpaid by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* shareholders to do, as well as helping himself to other monies. The ‘motives’ were revenge.

It has always been possible to find men who are of the opinion that this lawsuit is a good thing because it to them is financially lucrative.

Graham Kerr did not mind who knew his opinion of the three men who were paid to become tree-counting ‘experts’, which is surely what Des Granges is inferring here. Did Des Granges also have himself in mind?

Des Granges damned himself by adding that from the beginning it was necessary for him to take immediate steps as *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*’s legal advisers in Paris wanted to start proceedings in the Joint Court. Hence he took action in the French Court in Vila.

Would I have done that if I had, as claimed by Mr Vibert, been in cahoots with the Kerrs?

By so doing he did the Kerrs a worse disservice. If the case had gone before the Joint Court it would have been dismissed at once and the long years of legal harassment and financial ruin that faced Graham Kerr would not have happened.

Des Granges went on to explain that the first judgment in 1936 ordered a ‘committee of experts’ to count the number of trees that had been on the plantations, several cyclones and almost ten years earlier:

I met the greatest difficulties in finding experts who did not decline the job; I travelled to the place [Santo] with them, in a motor boat 8 metres long with 14 of us on board [underlined in the original].³⁰

I obtained a judgement of condemnation by default and, despite the opposition of the Kerrs, a satisfactory judgement on the question of competence which has been recently confirmed in the Superior Court of Appeal in Noumea; we are still far from the final goal, but SFNH can rely on me to do my best to obtain success finally.

This was from the pen of the man who initially told Graham Kerr that the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had no case against him and even showed him hospitality at his home at Bellevue. Des Granges knew Condominium law. He also knew the lukewarm attitude taken by British authorities to the interests of her nationals. Hoping a blind-eye would be turned; he pulled off a cynical coup and brought the case before the French Court thereby assuring himself of a nice fat legal fee.

He mentioned having spent 30,000F to date and included two further expense accounts

The payment of expenses of procedure and registration fees can only be pursued against the Kerrs after we have obtained definite judgement against them, with costs.

This ‘strictly confidential’ letter reveals what the honest Graham Kerr was up against. Ethics did not enter into it—only financial gain.

Des Granges raised an interesting point in his letter which I think might help to explain the strange silence of British authorities on the matter. At the time of Vibert’s (as Director of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*) case against Kerr in 1936 there ‘was very much a parallel case against Mr Joyer. What became of it?’ wrote Des Granges. ‘I have heard repeated many times that the aims of the lawsuit directed against the Kerrs was not to get anything from them, their situation being known, but in reality to pursue Mr Joyer’.

André Joyer co-director with Charles Aupied of the newly formed in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 1927 was removed from that post when it and two other New Hebridean plantation companies were amalgamated with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in 1930. Joyer learned from reliable sources that Aupied was helping himself to large sums of money belonging to these companies. Graham Kerr also pointed out the large amounts paid to Aupied on the Balance sheet for 1932, warning *Conseil* that if such bad management continued *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* would go bankrupt. This it did in 1934.

A lethargic Government Committee of Enquiry was set up which unwillingly listened, to the well-authenticated accusations by Joyer, which included Kerr’s warnings and also the accounts of H. Rohr—whom Vibert had sacked from his post as Chief Accountant in the New Hebrides for *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in 1929—which revealed financial discrepancies.

To get Aupied off the hook it was thus necessary to prove to a French audience, unfamiliar with the Condominium of New Hebrides, that a foreigner, Mr Kerr, the man Joyer was relying on to get the *Société* out of its agricultural difficulties, was not to be trusted. By inference this was made to suggest Joyer was not to be trusted either.

This was not the first time *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* had gone bankrupt.³¹ The French State was a major shareholder and high-up members of Parliament were involved. When the case first came up Pierre Laval was the French Minister for Colonies and thought to be one of them. Other members of Parliament wanted the matter cleaned up.

The first years of the 1930s in France were notable for financial fraud involving the State, for example the Stavisky case which brought down the Government in 1934. That same year the French State agreed to bail out *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* on condition it no longer carried out agricultural work on its plantations. They were to be sold or leased.

Enter André Joyer, a shareholder, trusted by Kerr and of whom I have found no record for dishonesty. He, aided by the firm of Julliens in Marseilles who also knew and trusted Kerr, decided to use Kerr to try and put an end to one more financial scandal that was bedevilling France and to return the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* to financial solvency by putting its valuable plantations in the Hebrides back into agricultural production. These people, in their turn, were supported by other influential members of Parliament. Thus there were two warring French Parliamentary factions in which Graham Kerr had become unwittingly involved.

Unfortunately for the Kerrs, and particularly Graham Kerr, the crisis situation in Europe at this time, and Britain's wish to hand over her Condominium responsibilities to Australia, probably made it politically expedient to turn a blind eye to what her French partner was doing to a British national in the Pacific. The only practicing British Lawyer in Vila at this time was B.C. Ballard who, since 1934, had been Australian Commonwealth Government Representative to the New Hebrides which probably precluded him from taking an active interest in Graham Kerr's case.

Ballard, after cursorily reading the extensive French documentation given him by Kerr, had reached the same conclusion as Des Granges that it was 'very much a parallel case against Mr Joyer ... in reality, to pursue Mr Joyer'. Was this why the British Judge was so strangely silent? Like Rousselot, Ballard needed to know the real background of the case which absolutely cleared Graham Kerr and the Kerr family of wrong doing.

However much England wanted out, Britain and France were the legal partners in the Condominium Government of New Hebrides, not Australia, which left the Kerrs high and dry. It was really a matter for the British Foreign Office which since the advent of the Western Pacific High Commission in Fiji had no say in Colonial Office affairs in that area. As with Captain Macleod back in 1886, when the French tried to oust him by force from his property at Havannah Harbour, it was only the direct intervention of the Foreign Office with its hand withdrawn from the velvet glove of diplomacy that put an end to the nonsense.

At this particular time, 1939, I am sure the Foreign Office considered it had more than enough to deal with in Europe. Hence help for its nationals in the Pacific was not forthcoming to put an end to another case of 'nonsense'.

For, although what Des Granges said about Joyer was true, both Aupied and Vibert were working behind the scenes to get personal revenge against the foreigner Kerr who publicly showed up their swindles. Graham Kerr never found out what happened to Joyer. With war declared on 3 September and the fall of France in June 1940 he was cut off from all communication with his friends in France and when he went to France to find out in 1947 he was met by silence.

Things that happened before the war were no longer of importance except, as Kerr soon found out, the case against him and the huge sum he supposedly owed *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*—meaning the French government—in costs and damages.

How does all of this play out in Graham Kerr's 1939 diary?

On 31 May 1939 in a letter to Ballard in Vila, after Me. Marcel Coursin brought up the existence of the Conveyance of 11 October 1928, Kerr wrote: 'That document prepared by Mr Wallace should put the case out of French jurisdiction.'³²

Graham, Muriel and Nancy Kerr were now living in Noumea and Len, aged 16, was paying them a visit from Sydney. There was much picnicking at Anse Vata, Ouen Toro, Magenta, Plum and other places. They also socialised with their many friends, British and French. Kerr set up and furnished the new office and tried to teach Guillemot the meticulous Australian accounting methods he expected. His wife, Muriel, was roped in to do accounts when Guillemot showed his ineptitude. Graham Kerr was not an easy taskmaster and it would not have been easy setting up an office in foreign surroundings.

Kerr soon had to be travelling again, leaving for Vila on *Commissaire Ramel* on its way back to France on 11 February 1939. He admitted to ‘feeling lonely’ as he thought he saw his family at Orphelinat waving as the ship passed by. In Vila on 18 February he went to a reception at the British Residence on Iririki. ‘The Joys are leaving on vacation and I suppose Blandy will be acting Resident Commissioner for a time—it is said in Vila that the Joys will not be coming back.’

In Vila he paid Customs’ dues and tried to get Pujol to understand the accounting system. Albert Jocteur was no longer in charge in Vila and Ballard, his lawyer, tried to get Jocteur to pay back money he owed to Kerr Bros, eventually having to sue him.

As usual when he was in Vila Graham Kerr became sick. On 23 February he felt ‘so bad towards evening that [he] went over to the hospital on Iririki—Dr. Frater gave [him] some medicine’. He spent the night at the hospital, but next day he checked himself out at 7am despite suggestions he should stay. *Polynésien* was due to leave the same day for Noumea and he needed ‘to push on clearing up to leave things in good order for Pujol, getting him into the run of our system of keeping accounts’.

The trip back to Noumea was not without problems caused by very bad weather. He was up most of the night. ‘At daylight we found ourselves amongst bad patches of reef—the merest chance we did not pile up ... we had run south of Havannah Pass—eventually we made the Pass but there was no pilot there’. They eventually picked the pilot up in Canal Woodin and made Noumea just before dark where Graham Kerr found Len with the car plus Muriel and Nancy to greet him. ‘Right glad to be here,’ he wrote. Len’s short visit was nearly over and he left for Sydney on *Neo Hébridais* 7 March, the family waving to him at the ship passed Sail Rock.

The new office was ‘nicely installed’ by 15 March and M. Mas, whose family owned the site and who had been giving a helping hand, was given a position on the staff at a low salary and he was taking some shares. On 22 March, taking advantage of a single-engine plane, *Avion Martenet*, flying to France via Brisbane, Graham Kerr was ‘busy with mail’. Air mail was not all that common in 1939 and they were relieved to hear that the plane arrived safely in Australia the next day.

Kerr went to New Hebrides again on 31 March; this time to Santo and Hog Harbour Plantation. Jules Jocteur in the ‘native cutter’ which Kerr Bros in Sydney had bought for the Islanders was at Luganville to meet him. After fixing up discharge pay, and repatriation costs for foreign labour with the French authorities there, they left the same day for Hog Harbour. After a walk ‘out to the Point with Jules Jocteur’, he wrote: ‘Good work has been done but it must be followed up’.

Graham Kerr needed to see Raymond Coulon further south so on 9 April with two ‘boys’ and himself riding Jules Jocteur’s horse, they made their way up to the plateau behind the plantation through trees choked with vines and down the other side to Shark Bay. Raymond Coulon had not managed to get back from Segond so Kerr talked with his sister instead. The Coulons had had an explosion on their launch a few months earlier and there was talk of the Kerrs providing an engine and both families using



Photo 81: Len (aged 16) and Nancy (aged 9) Kerr taken at a picnic early in 1939 at [Parc du] Ouen [Toro]. Photo provided by Len Kerr’s family (Lisa and Gary Kerr) in 2018



Photo 82: Len Kerr leaving 'Les Palmiers' the family home in Orphelinat, Noumea, to return to Sydney on 7 March 1939. Photo provided by Len Kerr's family (Lisa and Gary Kerr) in 2018

it. 'We find it rather awkward at Hog Harbour with no means of sea traffic.' *Toa* had been sold to Hagens the previous year; 'I don't know why'.

'Camille sent a boy to show us a better way out to the plateau', he wrote, being sorry for the poor horse when, very weary, they arrived back at Hog Harbour just before dark. It was not until the Americans arrived in New Hebrides in 1942 that roads were built on Santo, so any trip overland was a real effort.

He was now waiting for *Morinda* to make the trip south to Vila. In the interim Ballande's launch arrived from Port Olry with M. Andre Ballande; M. Bonneaud (Noumea Director of Ballandes); and M. Launay, Ballandes' Manager at Segond Channel, who with the captain of the launch, had to be put up for the night, such hospitality being taken for granted and freely offered. The next day the visitors were taken on an excursion out to the Point in the truck and then up to the Plateau by Jocteur. 'They are easy to entertain.'

Morinda left with Mme. Jocteur also on board. She was not well and going to Vila. Kerr too was 'sick and feverish'. Perhaps it was the thought of Vila for which he felt no affection that made him feel that way?

He spent from 13 until 20 April in Vila mostly not feeling well but being entertained by the Pujol family at Mélé. He was also invited to dinner by M. Desmoulières, Vila Manager of *Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébridais*, and his wife; M. Ballande, M. Bonneaud and Mr and Mrs Dal Gubbay being the other guests. This was probably returned hospitality for that offered at Hog Harbour.

There is mention of a visit to his lawyer Ballard, with no further comment. He also mentioned tennis and the Seagoes and that the Hills asked him up to tea and cards and he spent a pleasant evening.³³ There was no lack of friends both British and French.



Photo 83: Graham, Nancy (9) and Len Kerr outside Les Palmiers, Orphelinat, before Len returned to Sydney on 7 March 1939. Photo provided by Len Kerr's family (Lisa and Gary Kerr) in 2018

He booked a passage to Noumea on *Eridan* which on 20 April 1939 arrived with Henri Sautot a new French Resident Commissioner on board who was replacing M. Casimir, who left Vila in the same ship.

Back in Noumea Graham Kerr with the help of Jean My his partner in *Société Kerr/My* went into the details of the registration of the new company and on 2 May they saw their notary Me. Rolland

All seems to be in order. Jean My has been of great assistance to me—he is so keen and grasps the why and wherefore of a thing that neither Neveu or Guillemot could do.

Jean My was married to a daughter of the Russ family in Noumea and Muriel Kerr and Mme. Russ were good friends. Another friend was Julius Petersen's daughter Anna, who would soon marry Marcel Kollen and Muriel was her witness. Muriel Kerr was tactful and understated which offset her husband's more serious approach and won her many friends.

Then they were once again travelling. This time they went to Sydney so Muriel Kerr could make the acquaintance of her first grandchild, David, born to their second daughter Muriel on 28 April. Nancy aged 9 and now able to speak French, was to stay in Noumea with the Mas family while they were away.

Before they left there was mention on 15 May of his case with *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. My father called on Me. Coursin who told him it was held up waiting for the Kerr Bros Conveyance to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* of 11 October 1928 to arrive from Paris. We know from earlier in the chapter what was happening in that direction he did not yet know.

He had the satisfaction of knowing that the proposed *Statuts* of the new company were now very clear. He, Jean My, and Guillemot saw Me. Rolland and went through them very carefully. 'Jean My is a tower of strength in examining these matters.' Before leaving for Sydney he gave Rolland the balance sheet of the new company.³⁴

Poor little Nancy was very upset to see her parents leaving even though she was with people she knew well and her mother too would have been worried. They reached Sydney in *Pierre Loti* on 26 May where D.H. Kerr met them with his car and took them home to 'Kermadec'. Here the rest of the family, Joyce, Katherine, Margaret and Len would have dashed around making everything as 'shipshape' as possible for their father's inspection. 'The girls have the place looking very well and everything neat and tidy.' The gardener, Mr Addyman, had the garden looking very well too, so we all passed muster.

There was a meeting of all family shareholders in *Société Kerr/My* including Walter Kerr who represented his mother Hannah Kerr, widow of the eldest brother James who had died in 1912, so that they would all know the course of events.

On 8 June Graham Kerr drove to Port Kembla in a car he had rented to meet Mr. Caillard who arrived there in *Cap Tarifa* and collected letters from Valette which the latter had brought from France. He was on his way back to Noumea on *Pierre Loti* on 29 June. Muriel Kerr was staying a little while longer but Nancy could not be left without her family for too long. It was just a hello and goodbye visit for the poor child. She



Photo 84: Katherine Kerr holding her nephew David Bogg (born 28 April) maybe greeting Muriel and Graham Kerr on their arrival in Sydney from Noumea on 26 May 1939

stayed with the Guillemots and had meals with her father at his hotel before *Pierre Loti* left for Vila on 4 July.

Here he arranged for Pujol to go to Santo, while he manned the Vila office. He must have been shocked at what he found for, on 13 July, he wrote: 'With difficulty in getting the right people to employ, and disastrous price for copra, I decided to sell our stock to Ballandes, and close the Vila agency'. With no permanent office site and no proper supervision he could see no alternative. He needed a grown-up son to help with the family's widespread enterprises but Len was just 17 and not in good health.

There was quite a lot of excitement in Vila at this time when *Ville d'Amiens*, in which ship my father was to travel back to Noumea, was delayed going to the rescue of *Polynésien* which had gone ashore on Hat Island on 15 July and had to be towed off after jettisoning 900 tons of her cargo.

Back in Noumea he began a hunt for somewhere to live when Muriel returned from Sydney. 'Houses are almost impossible to procure, and any that are building are let months before completion'. He accepted the kind invitation of the Mas family to stay with them in the interim. He was lucky enough through friends to get the house of a judge who was going to France, but it would not be available until the *Commissaire Ramel* left in early September, so he tried to get rooms at the Central Hotel. In a nick of time, he succeeded. His sister Agnes Kerr who was due to audit the company books and wife Muriel arrived in Noumea on *Pierre Loti* on 26 July in time for Nancy's 10th birthday.

Things were not going smoothly getting the new office up and running and arranged to Kerr's liking. New fittings and furniture were ordered as nothing could be left to chance. When he was very worried, he was even more difficult to please. Mess meant chaos to Graham Kerr.

On 5 August the *Orama* arrived in Noumea from Sydney 'with about 800 tourists on board—the town is full of them. *Pierre Loti* left for Sydney soon after—Governor Jore is going away by her and

his successor is coming by the *Notou* on Sunday'. There was a Ball at the Town Hall that evening for the *Orama* passengers which my parents attended. This must surely have been the last tourist trip she would make with the war just a month away.

On 9 August Yves Leconte, nephew of Jules Leconte, joined the new company at a low salary to start. He was to travel through New Caledonia, armed with catalogues and samples to drum up custom. He came back on 30 August with very large orders. They took over Judge Berton's place at Orphelinat on 13 August with Agnes Kerr remaining at the Hotel Central. By 16 August the office was ready 'and the place seems to be attracting people'. Agnes, who had been ill, was back at her final auditing of the books of the old company and all seemed right with the world.

On 28 August he wrote 'Today the Pan American Airways "Yankee Clipper" is due to arrive on her first trial flight from 'Frisco, Honolulu, Canton Island to Noumea, and on to Auckland—no



Photo 85: Four generations May–June 1939: just after David Bogg was born: clockwise from the left Lucy Hutton, Muriel Bogg, Muriel Kerr and baby David Bogg—photo provided in 2018 by Lindsay Benaud (née Bogg), Muriel's daughter.

doubt this service has something to do with American (British) French defence in the Pacific.' He picked up Muriel and Nancy and M. and Mme. Mas in the car and took them to see the arrival. 'The Clipper came along about 10 to 6 and after circling once, glided gracefully onto the water over by Nouville—this is quite an event in the history of Noumea—I think everyone...was out watching.' The Clipper left for Auckland on 30 August. Kerr's diary entry for that day ended with—'Situation very shaky in Europe'.

Diary entry 2 September:

War has broken out in Europe and Germany has invaded Poland—France and England have complete mobilisation from today—Noumea is very excited. That lunatic Hitler has plunged the world into this. Very difficult to say what will come out of it. Put in a worrying day. Noumea has called up nearly all classes to the colours—I must get down to Santo as soon as possible as no doubt Jules Jocteur ... will be called up ... The American Flying Boat arrived back from Auckland this afternoon.

He, like everyone else needed to worry. With a new company just getting started and Leconte back from the country with large orders and staff likely to be called up, where would that leave him? Also would he be able to keep up supplies? On 4 September they were

... rushed all day for food supplies, soap etc—much excitement in town with young fellows called up.

6 September;

According to war news reported here, Germany seems to be getting a rough time: British fleet bombarded some of their naval ports. France has broken through the Seigfried Line and Poland is now in German territory—difficult to say if news is reliable.

With all his family interests widely scattered, not to mention the case against him conducted from France, this was indeed a very worrying time for Graham Kerr—no longer a young man. He would turn 66 on 21 September. However, all his Noumea friends showed solidarity, although at the office, Leconte and Guillemot were not getting along well with Mme. Mas. On 19 September *Neo Hebridais* arrived from Sydney with 50 tons of flour on order, so depleted stocks were helped a little. He also managed to get an order away to Indochina for rice to be delivered by *Pierre Loti*. More goods also arrived on the *Neo Hebridais* on 20 October.

By 2 October he was finding things 'very difficult with regulations for this, that and the other, but government not set up to deal with the practical side of things'. Worse on 4 October. 'A terribly trying day—it is difficult to carry on under present circumstances—restrictions—copra down—expenses up ... must get down to Santo to cut down expenses'. On 21 October he took Muriel and Nancy down to the wharf to see Marie Pelicier the new Governor of New Caledonia land. He was not getting co-operation at the office, 'neither, Guillemot, nor Mas nor Leconte have any idea of keeping stock in order—just one thing dumped on top of another'. He 'did not know why people are born sometimes'. On 31 October he wrote: 'Times are very difficult—as a precaution I gave employees a month's notice ... there would be very good business to do if we could carry sufficient stock'. Agnes Kerr returned to Sydney on *Pierre Loti* on 12 November, her work over for the time being.

By 15 November Graham Kerr decided that Berton's place at Orphelinat was too far out of Noumea for Muriel and Nancy if he had to go to the New Hebrides and, as no other places were offering, they moved back to the Hotel Central. He still had the car and they had many picnic evening meals at Anse Vata and Magenta which would have pleased Nancy. On 29 November they finally found a place at Vallée du Tir and moved out of the hotel once again. As mentioned earlier Anna Petersen married Marcel Kollen on 6 December. Muriel Kerr was a witness at the Hotel de Ville and Graham Kerr attended

the wedding reception later. Marcel was one of the young men getting ready to join the French forces in Europe fighting for de Gaulle and Free France.

Shipping from France was getting less frequent. On 8 December *Sagittaire* 'the first *M.M.* vessel from Europe for three months' came in. 'We have cargo on board that was shipped from Marseilles by the *Eridan* in August. Four months en route and into the bargain the goods were much damaged'.

In a shrinking goods market Graham Kerr was looking round for trade and on 17 December decided to go to a place called Carénage to try and find a stand of araucaria, a timber wanted in Australia. Julius Petersen was to provide a launch. The launch needed attention and the expedition turned back before reaching its destination. On 20 December 'all hands and the cook got them back to Noumea'—the trip to Carénage put off till later.

Christmas day was spent with Muriel and Nancy and one of her friends picnicking at Anse Vata and then on 29 December, Graham Kerr was on his way again this time to Newcastle, New South Wales, in *Néo Hébridais* with a cargo of chrome-ore, loaded at Bourail. The 'ship has twelve passengers, but awful accommodation ... I am sleeping in the dining room'. Among the passengers were Jewish refugees from Europe. The last day of the year saw them on their way to Newcastle: 'filthy ship and miserable meals [for first class fare] ... nasty sea outside with a cross sea—rolling badly—too much sea for table to be set in the evening'. He did not watch the old year out. But at least they were on their way to Sydney, one of the places he needed to visit.

I wonder if in the coming war years my father ever looked back at this trip and this ship, as one of comfort and luxury. It is as well the future was hidden from him. The family's fortunes were now inextricably tied up with France and Europe, not just with Australia. As a British subject with interests in the Condominium of the New Hebrides he was in a unique and uncertain position with no forceful backing from his own authorities.

Not so *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. Following consultation with Professor Hamel of the Sorbonne in Paris, who had purposely not been briefed with the vital evidence that would have quashed its case, Graham Kerr's ruthless enemy was now ready to bring the case against him in the French Court in Vila.

Endnotes

- 1 See Black Envelope No. 3, Valette Letter File in chron. order.
- 2 It would seem that Neveu was not only unable to adapt to life in Australia but during his visits to the Islands in 1938 he also antagonised at least two Frenchmen whom Kerr was trying to get to transfer their custom from Ballandes to Julliens. Kerr and Neveu had mutual respect for each other but Kerr considered the Neveu to have a superiority complex. See Black Envelope No. 3, Valette Letter File. Kerr to Valette 6 June 1939.
- 3 See Black Envelope No. 3, Valette Letter File. Kerr to Valette 18 Jan 1939.
- 4 See Black Envelope No. 3, Valette Letter File. Kerr to Valette 18 March 1939.
- 5 In fact there was a rumour spreading in the New Hebrides that Ballandes 'had spread it around that people shipping copra to Julliens [in recent years] had lost their money'. This roused their ire and Valette retorted that Julliens had never had business dealings with New Caledonia before entering into relations with Kerr Bros Ltd. If Kerr could find the direct source of the rumour, they would take steps to bring the matter before the Minister for Colonies and the Under Secretary of the Merchant Marine. See Black Envelope No. 3. Kerr to Valette 2 April 1939 and Valette to Kerr 26 May 1939.
- 6 See *Hébridais* pp. 34–36 for short biography of Marc Cariou.
- 7 See Appendix 1. *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* [CFINH]. From 1925 Charles Aupied controlled the affairs of both SFNH and CFINH in the New Hebrides working in close contact with Georges Tronchon who, as Government Representative, had the ear of the Minister for Colonies.
- 8 See Black Envelope No.3, Kerr to Valette 9 March 1939.
- 9 See Black Envelope No.3, Valette to Kerr 6 April 1939.
- 10 See *Hébridais* p. 197 for a short biography of Jules Repiquet 1874–1960.
- 11 See Black Envelope No. 3, Kerr to Valette 7 May 1939.
- 12 See *Hébridais* p. 95 for short biography of Nicolas Harelle 1875–1954.
- 13 See Black Envelope No. 3 Valette Letter File. Kerr to Valette 2 June 1939.
- 14 CGFH was one of three agricultural companies taken over by SFNH in July 1930.
- 15 Letter Kerr to Valette 2 June 1939. 'Mr Houchard is on his way to France ... He is a valued client of ours ... He has been consigning most of his produce through Raoul-Duval, but I think we have now got him round to Julliens'. See *Hébridais* pp. 104–106 for short biography of Auguste Houchard, 1881–1952.
- 16 Edmond Caillard, at this time Director of *Compagnie Cotonnière Nouvelles-Hébrides*, 'is a very capable straight-forward man ... I think that if Mr Caillard had a free hand he would ship all to you, but it is probable that Ballandes have a big say in the matter... He thinks the producer is not getting enough for his copra and wants to enquire in France of some way of getting better returns,' For short biography of Caillard see *Hébridais* pp. 33–34. In his letter of introduction, Kerr to Valette 9 June 1939: 'We have known Mr Caillard for very many years and we regret that there are not more of his stamp in the New Hebrides to represent French interests. He has built up large production under considerable handicap. The making of a plantation of coconuts and bringing it into bearing following the bad years from 1930 onwards, has been no light task, and I am sure that is better for France than many colossal speculations on the *Bourse*'.
- 17 See Black Envelope No. 3. Valette Letter File. Valette to Kerr 1 Aug 1939.
- 18 As above. Kerr to Valette 7 Dec 1939.
- 19 See White Envelope No. 4 for a copy of Corbin de Mangoux's 1930 report.
- 20 See Folder 10. Xeroxes found in the *Outre Mer* Archives, Paris 1983. 71 APC SFNH Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*. Documents arranged in chronological order.
- 21 See Folder 10. Xeroxes found in the *Outre Mer* Archives, Paris 1983. 71 APC SFNH Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*.
- 22 See Folder 10. Xeroxes found in the *Outre Mer* Archives, Paris 1983. 71 APC SFNH Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*. Included the next quotation under date 6 April 1939.
- 23 It is necessary to know that Me. Joseph-Marc Coursin, lawyer—and father of Me. Marcel Coursin, lawyer for the Kerrs in Noumea at this time—was in 1928 acting for the SFNH in Vila.
- 24 See Folder 10. Xeroxes found in the *Outre Mer* Archives, Paris 1983. 71 APC SFNH Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*.
- 25 See Folder 10. Xeroxes found in the *Outre Mer* Archives, Paris 1983. 71 APC SFNH Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*.
- 26 See Folder 10. Xeroxes found in the *Outre Mer* Archives, Paris 1983. 71 APC SFNH Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*.
- 27 See Folder 10. Xeroxes found in the *Outre Mer* Archives, Paris 1983. 71 APC SFNH Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*.
- 28 See Folder 10. Xeroxes found in the *Outre Mer* Archives, Paris 1983. 71 APC SFNH Serie II, *Affaire Kerr*.
- 29 Far into the future in 1983, while I was in Vila at the start of my researches into our family history, I met Geoffrey Seagoe whose father, E.G. Seagoe, was a member of British Condominium staff at the time in question. He asked me if my father ever got damages from SFNH. Everyone in the New Hebrides knew that he was innocent and the case against him a 'put-up' job, he said.
- 30 My father, told by a witness, knew exactly what happened and was prepared to reveal his findings before any court

qualified to hear him. Apparently the 'experts' took one look and left it that. They were told what they needed to find and in 6 days were back in Vila with the neat conclusion that the trees that were lacking represented 4 million francs to be paid by the Kerrs. One of the experts, Colardeau, left Vila before his final attestation. Was the sleazy set-up finally all too much for him I wonder.

31 See Appendix 1.

32 See Ballard Letter File.

33 George Sidney Hill was Treasurer to the British side of the Condominium Government from 1935 to 1954. See *Hébridais* p. 104 for short biography.

34 See White Envelope No. 1, SK/M Letter file, 29 May 1939 for Statement by G.L.S. Kerr about registration of the new company.



Appendix 1

Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébridaise — Beginnings

After the First World War ended in 1918, French currency was greatly devalued against the pound sterling. This led to increasing difficulties for both British and French Condominium staff, who were paid in francs. An entry in Graham Kerr's diary for March 1924 said: 'The French franc after going to about 11,950F to the pound sterling came back to about 90F in a week!' When the Anglo-French agreement was signed the franc and sterling were at par at 15 F to the pound sterling.

Otherwise France, with many more citizens settled in the Group, was preparing to make an effort to prove France's superiority and right to the New Hebrides.

The Joint Court, whose prime and most pressing job was to adjudicate on claims to land, was not yet reconstituted and the salary question—Esperanza had demanded that his return depended on some of his salary being paid in sterling—did not help. It suited France to prolong the delay as *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides's* extensive land claims were by no means secure.

Other plans were also in the pipe-line in Paris. *Messageries Maritimes* now set up a direct and regular service from Marseilles via the Suez Canal to Saigon, New Hebrides, Noumea and back to Marseilles via Tahiti and the Panama Canal. This meant that French planters had rapid and direct access to European markets and no longer had to send their produce via Noumea and Sydney, a cumbersome proceeding as it was slower and more costly. *Messageries Maritimes* still had vessels plying between Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, via the Indian Ocean and Suez Canal to Marseilles. Yet another vessel on this line the *Céphée* came to Sydney on her maiden voyage in 1924.

In this period Noumea, home of the French High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, became a more important business centre. This was a shot in the arm for her faltering trade. New Caledonia's mother-country, France, had paid a higher price than Britain during the war with the added humiliation of being occupied by Germany, so hurt pride needed salving. With the British Western Pacific High Commission firmly ensconced in Fiji to exert control over the British part of the Condominium, a battle for supremacy between the two Powers appeared to be in the making.

France would never accept that 'perfidious Albion' wanted no part of the New Hebrides whereas British subjects making their living there had reached this bitter conclusion many years earlier. It was no wonder that frustrated British planters were attracted by what their French fellow planters were about to enjoy, while the French planters were prepared to take full advantage of a situation they could not understand. If Britain did not want the New Hebrides why then could France not have it?

But that was not all. In 1924 there was talk of a new French company, *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CFINH). It had its inaugural meeting in Paris 30 October 1924, followed by a second meeting 7 November the same year. The object of the company was to develop an area of 750,000 hectares of land claimed by the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, which was again in financial difficulties. It was set up with the cooperation of the French Government with a capital of 4 million francs provided by the Bank of Indo-China; Union Bank of Paris; *Société Financière et Coloniale*; *Société de Nickel* (the Rothschilds); *Ballande et Cie* and others.

Following the November meeting General de Salins was elected President and Charles Revel, Inspector General of Colonies in 1924, was the Deputy Administrator. Other officials included Edouard Picanon, Inspector of Colonies and Governor of New Caledonia 1902–1904, who with Georges Tronchon was to

represent the French government on the Board of Management. Tronchon had direct access to the Minister for Colonies, M. Daladier. Other members of the board were M. Laure, Noumea Director of *Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CFNH) (Ballande), and a representative of the Higginson family.

Raoul-Duval of Le Havre who was an agent for colonial mercantile products and of partly Scottish ancestry had a seat on the Board. Tiby Hagen of the New Hebridean firm of *Hagen Frères* used Raoul-Duval as its French agent. In this doing this he gained for himself certain unspecified favours which would finally earn Tiby the distrust of the Kerr family.

On 7 January 1925 the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* reserved to itself 45% of the product of land sales of the new Company. The Director of both companies, Charles Aupied, formerly a stockbroker from Bordeaux, was to control the New Hebridean affairs of both companies. This was a very powerful position.

Neither the position held by Charles Aupied nor that of Tronchon was mentioned in the original reports and their names would have meant nothing to Graham Kerr. As will be seen later, these people will come to have a particular significance in his story. At the time the array of impressive names, some of whom he would have known, would have aroused respect and confidence in him that here at last was a way out of otherwise insuperable difficulties. The feeling would have been reinforced because he had very good relations with most French settlers in the New Hebrides, including with Emile My who had arrived from France in 1912 to work for de Béchade.

My left that job in 1916 and in Vila founded a company, the *Société Coopérative des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, to get better prices for agricultural products. He did this with the help of Fernand Largeau, local director of the *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. This was a venture dear to Graham Kerr's heart.

When the Kerr family left Vila to make Sydney their home in August 1918, Kerr Brothers Store in Rue Higginson and Kerr Brothers House behind it were leased to Emile My. The My family would always remain close friends as would other Frenchmen in the Group. Richard, My Emile My's youngest son, lived at our home in Sydney in 1922 and worked in Kerr Bros office, before returning to Noumea in November 1923 to do his military training.

Paris, not the New Hebrides, was the centre of the future trouble.

It was through Emile My that Graham Kerr made contact with Charles Revel, Inspector General of Colonies, when he visited the New Hebrides in 1922. According to his diary entry for 16 May 1922 written from Vila, Kerr

... went to see a high French official [Charles Revel] ... out here to report to the French government on the New Hebrides. He sent word he would like to see me, so I went up to the French Judge's house with Mr. My ... [they] spoke of New Hebrides matters, Australian opinion re the New Hebrides, British settlers' opinion, steam services etc. He seems a nice fellow and very alert and clear.

It was also Emile My who, in Paris in 1925–26, made the initial offer of the Kerr properties at Turtle Bay and elsewhere and Julius Petersen's plantation at Mate Wulu to *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* and *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*. Charles Aupied in his stockbroker-of-real-estate capacity acted for both the above companies with the idea of the formation of yet another company, based on the Kerr/Petersen holdings, which would in 1927 become *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*. But, as would become evident later, Aupied had no interest in or knowledge of the agricultural procedures necessary for the running of a plantation.

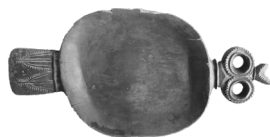
The formation of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* in 1924, which also included setting up a branch of the Bank of Indochina in Vila did not escape the notice of Smith-Rewse, the new British Resident Commissioner in succession to Merton King. He reported its formation to the Western Pacific High Commissioner saying that his advice was 'on good authority'.¹ This was followed by a confidential letter from the Secretary of State for Colonies to the Western Pacific High Commissioner containing copies of articles on the subject retrieved from four French journals.²

Not remarked on at the time, was the strange idea that in France the New Hebrides seemed to be regarded as a French colony not a Condominium Government. This meant that the French disregarded

the fact that these *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* lands—many of them Higginson titles and, like all other land in the New Hebrides, much of it disputed—had to have their titles ratified by the Joint Court. The Joint Court had been set up in 1910 for that express purpose but was closed in 1914 before any titles were established.

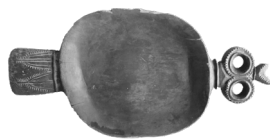
The Spanish President of the Joint Court Count Buena de Esperanza had gone on leave in 1916 and despite the best efforts of the British Foreign Office to get him back on the job, and the best efforts of the French Foreign Office to oppose his return, he was still dilly-dallying.³

This French attitude, in Paris, of completely ignoring Condominium regulations, would become very evident in Graham Kerr's story.



Endnotes

- 1 WPHC 3032/1924. Smith-Rewse to WPH Commissioner 10 Nov 1924.
- 2 WPHC 21/1925. Sec. of State CO to WPH Commissioner 21 Nov 1924.
- 3 It was a matter of money. When the original Anglo-French Agreement was set up in 1906 the two currencies were at par and it was arranged that the salaries of all Condominium officials would be paid in francs. However as a result of the First World War the French currency had nose-dived and understandably Esperanza wanted to be paid in sterling. I also believe he did not want to return to the New Hebrides and the French who did not want their land titles to come before the Court were happy to hinder his return.



Appendix 2

The Problem of Labour for British Subjects in the New Hebrides in the 1920s

The major difficulty experienced by the Kerrs and shared by all British planters in the New Hebrides was their inability as British subjects to get foreign labour to run their plantations, a disability not suffered by the French. Indigenous labour was at this time in very short supply and very expensive.

The use of foreign labour by French planters was the cause of very effective propaganda from the Presbyterian Mission that the French were trying to swamp the Group with foreign labour. This, the Mission averred, was the reason for the rapid decline in Indigenous numbers and I believe this was scare tactics.

Many people believed this simplistic explanation but Merton King with his long experience and reading on the subject based his opinions on those advanced by the late Dr William Rivers¹:

Than whom none was more competent to speak. Dr Rivers lays especial emphasis on the psychological factor. He attributes the decline of the Melanesian population to this: 'That the people have been deprived of nearly all that gives interest to their lives' and this loss of interest has been brought about by the 'unintelligent and indiscriminating action (of Europeans) towards native institutions'.²

King, always fair-minded, did not pick on the New Hebrides Mission. This was the era of rampant Western colonisation of the Pacific. At this time a remark by the Secretary to the Western Pacific High Commission, H. Vaskess, on the front of the Annual Report for the New Hebrides for 1924, that he 'was unaware that a "type of civilization" existed in the New Hebrides prior to the advent of the Europeans', would not in general have raised an eyebrow at that time, even in the kindest of persons.³

But the New Hebrides Mission must bear some of the blame. From the beginnings of the white history of the New Hebrides the Presbyterian Mission had its finger in the pie. The New Hebrides Mission thought that it alone should have the management of the Indigenous population to mould as it thought fit. The Anglican Melanesian Mission preceded it but was never such a militant body.

Unfortunately when the Western Pacific High Commission was set up in 1875, the Colonial Office sought to ward off having to annex yet another group of islands as it had enough places in the Pacific for its strategic and other purposes. The Colonial Office therefore decreed that the only British subjects it would tolerate and protect in the New Hebrides were the missionaries. So missionaries had a legitimacy denied to other British subjects who were also trying to make a living there and the missionaries used their legitimacy to advantage. British settlers were for the most part ordinary people, like the missionaries themselves, and like their fellows elsewhere. They were not criminals hiding away from 'decent' society as they have been made out to be.

To protect what the Mission considered its territory all sorts of exaggerated accusations, generally with no hard-and-fast evidence, were put about by the New Hebrides Mission to the detriment of other British people. Some had a basis in truth. Later, when it came to foreigners, Frenchmen, invading their pad, the stories became rapidly worse. No accusation was too fanciful to report to the New Hebrides Mission's wide audience and, after the Anglo-French Agreement of 1906 was signed between England and France to form a Condominium and rule jointly, these stories would get worse.

One real bone of contention that caused bitterness was that while a British subject who transgressed Condominium regulations was immediately dealt with; French authorities balked at dealing the same way with their nationals. Perhaps they thought it would look as if they were bowing to New Hebrides Mission commands.

It needs to be realised that New Hebridean Indigenous culture was in no way like the Western one of the time which was based on monogamy where the women stayed home and cared for the children and the men worked to support them. Here women did the work and the men did the fighting. There was no system of marriage to one man. Women were valuable possessions at the mercy of their men and treated accordingly. They were slaves to be bought and sold, or killed, as their black owners wished. This makes it understandable that the New Hebrides Mission would wish to alter things.

It was what the missionaries proposed that was the trouble. A western system was imposed of marriage to one man who had been converted to Christianity—or brainwashed if you will, as this was completely different from their own beliefs—or, if she had no husband, by giving complete control of the woman to her father. This was the plan missionaries had in order to bring things under their own control. Not that they said so in so many words. Power was the name of the game. The trouble was that women, not recognising permanent marriage, often ran away with a new ‘owner’ to escape death or other cruelty. Thus women’s freedom was curtailed.

By the terms of the Anglo-French Agreement of 1906 all planters in the Group were permitted to recruit woman to work on their plantations if the women so wished. This ran completely counter to New Hebrides Mission ideas. But I am sure that without this clause in the Agreement the French would never have signed. Britain signed as the best way out of a sticky dilemma.

The New Hebrides Mission, though not a party to the Agreement, was part of the Colonial Office’s policy, through the Western Pacific High Commission, to maintain British order in a group of islands Britain did not want but for political reasons could not let the French have. So the New Hebrides Mission could exert a certain amount of influence, which it did, but could not force through all that it wanted.

British subjects were refused permission to employ women, except as domestic servants with the permission of their ‘husbands’ or the chief of their tribe, but the French went ahead with what their authorities had signed for in the 1906 Agreement.

The very unpopular Kings Regulation No 1 of 1912 and 1913—for which British subjects blamed the influence of the New Hebrides Mission—meant that anyone under British law could not employ woman under contract on their plantations despite the fact that women were the ones who did all the work. Merton King tactfully explained to the Western Pacific High Commissioner that this was *ultra vires* and as a violation of the terms of the 1906 Agreement would not be accepted by the Joint Court.

He was not heeded. I think that the New Hebrides Mission believed the French would finally be forced to toe the British line, thereby bringing to fruition its own plan to control Indigenous culture. This did not happen and the New Hebrides Mission accusations against the French grew rabid.

The French, used to secular government, refused to take any notice of a religious body that was not part of the Condominium Government and being able to employ women—Indigenous men did not like working on plantations without women—French plantations went ahead and many more French settlers arrived, whereas British efforts were impeded and many British settlers gave up and left the Group.

Matters did not improve when French authorities refused to act strongly against offences committed by Frenchmen while British subjects paid dearly for the slightest infringement.⁴ Maybe French authorities thought that if they acted strongly against its wrong-doers it would look like a concession to the New Hebrides Mission. The 1924 report for the New Hebrides gave the number of British subjects settled in the New Hebrides as being 296 against 2,352 under French law.⁵

By this time the New Hebrides Mission was hated by all settlers, French and English alike and the Western Pacific High Commission was well aware of it. Indigenous labour was hard to get, many Islanders were now working for themselves as should have been the case from the beginning, and the French were arranging to import foreign labour from Java or French Indo-China to make up the shortfall.

From correspondence dated 5 January 1925 between the British Resident Commissioner, G. Smith-Reuse, and the Western Pacific High Commissioner, Sir Eyre Hutson, the parlous situation for

British subjects was discussed.⁶ The Protocol of 1914 which amended the 1906 Agreement had not been proclaimed because of the First World War. This allowed woman to be recruited under certain rigid conditions so the French went ahead. In the British Protectorate of the Solomons woman could now also be employed under these conditions.

Smith-Rewse did not consider British planters in the New Hebrides any less reputable or less law abiding than their brothers in the Solomons. It was preferable to allow them to work on British plantations under the supervision of British District Agents. He said:

It is a better policy to allow women to go under regular conditions of employment than for them to accompany their husbands and guardians without having any legitimate occupation on the plantation.

As District Officer in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands from 1908–1913, Consul on Tonga from 1917–1921 and acting Administrator on Nauru before taking over from Merton King he knew his subject.

In the same correspondence of 5 July Smith-Rewse asked that British subjects be allowed Javanese labour like the French. In another letter dated 29 July 1925 he attached letters from five British planters in the Group:

Good examples of the general situation and the writers are all men who have good names with the New Hebrides native.⁷

Graham Kerr was one of them and here is some of what he had to say:

We beg to bring before you the grave situation we and other British Planters are in as regards a continued supply of labour for plantation work... We have no doubt that a plentiful supply of labour could be obtained from Java and we believe the Dutch Government is favourable to it. Reasonable conditions could be imposed for the proper treatment during indenture period and for repatriation at the end of the term.... local labour is fast becoming a thing of the past...It is probable that conditions imposed by New Zealand in regard to outside labour for Samoa would be suitable here.⁸

The fact that British subjects in Samoa could get labour was another sore point.

Endnotes

- 1 Dr William H.R. Rivers 1865–1922, a psychiatrist, had in his thirties made pioneering studies in tribal life based of field work in India and the Solomon Islands. During the First World War he worked with war-damaged soldiers in a hospital in Scotland. After the war he was regarded by his colleagues as one of the most exceptional minds in England. Rivers edited a book *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia*: Preface by Sir Everard Im Thurn, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1922 and published shortly before his death.
- 2 WPHC 1573/1924 under the date 27 May 1924, report by Merton King 1921–1922 on the native population, which is very enlightening.
- 3 WPHC 2094/1925.
- 4 See WPHC 214/1925 regarding employment of female native labourers by British Planters in New Hebrides. A comment at the end of this report by a person whose initials I cannot read contained the following: 'Extravagant charges have been laid against the French in this connection ... These statements are probably largely exaggerated emanating as they do from the Australian Presbyterian Mission whose bias against all French methods are extreme'. It was not that the French were blameless. Such criticism however was not likely to make them mend their ways, on the contrary.
- 5 WPHC 2094/1925.
- 6 WPHC 214/1925 Merton King to WPH Commissioner 5 Jan 1925.
- 7 WPHC 584/1925.
- 8 WPHC 2072/1925. Includes this letter from G.L.S. Kerr.



Appendix 3

Author's notes on Corbin de Mangoux's *Etude sur les Sociétés aux Nouvelles-Hébrides*, Publ. Paris March 1930

In the following words are taken from de Mangoux' 'Etude' with Katherine Cawsey's additions and comments in square brackets

Historical Overview: The Condominium is not a success—the two partners very different in their viewpoints.

The initial error [from France's point of view] dates from 1853 when Admiral Des Pointes neglected to include the New Hebrides amongst the Dependencies of New Caledonia. Noumea is the only port for traders and settlers. English settlers demanded annexation by France 1876. The French Government did not act.

The 'Agreement of 1878' [where both England and France agreed not to annex New Hebrides] was 'the germ of all the discussions and difficulties'. The *Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides* was set up in 1882. By 1886 the company owned 700,000 hectares, perhaps at times the land was gained in a manner that could be criticised but later put right.¹

Australian colonies were stirred up. In 1887 the Joint Naval Commission was set up. It could not act in 'civil' matters, only following an 'act of war'.

In 1901 the Governor of New Caledonia took on the duties of French High Commissioner for New Hebrides [In line with the position held by the Governor of Fiji who was Western Pacific High Commissioner under the British Colonial Office.]

Negotiations between England and France 1904 and 1906 led to the Anglo-French Agreement of 27 February 1906. Two High Commissioners, one in Suva and one in Noumea; two Resident Commissioners in Vila; Joint Court and finally the whole organisation—the Anglo-French Condominium.

Another Protocol, drawn up August 1914, was not promulgated because of the war.

The New Hebrides Mission has not helped the two nations to get together but despite all setbacks a rudimentary French colony has been set up.²

Subsidies were granted to *Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, now *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*, and more recently, in 1924, *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* was set up to give an equilibrium to a 'badly begun business but it continues to operate without a program'. It is necessary to develop an agricultural and commercial program:

The French Government comes in late, as always, but it comes in as it should. The French know how to colonise and if the French Government gives them more they will be the most powerful colonists in the world.

For all litigation between English and French, and in particular in all landed-property cases, the Resident Commissioners entrust them to the neutral organisation set up under the name of the Joint Court, comprising a neutral President [but how neutral in fact] chosen by the King of Spain and two Judges, a French one and an English one. These two Judges when they act for their own Administration

become Presidents of a French National Court and an English National Court.³ Judgements of the Joint Court are final and cannot be appealed against.

Regarding land-ownership in New Hebrides, the approximately 700,000 hectares claimed by French settlers, companies or individuals are not settled legally. There is no regulated ownership. Most land-claims are before the Joint Court—no official survey done or certificates of ownership have been granted. This makes it difficult to get people to invest. A group of companies and the colonists set up to register their land claims need a lawyer to defend them and put their claims in order and get the surveys done as a basis for judicial action. An aerial survey of claims is necessary.

Commerce and Shipping

(a) French Firms:

Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides. Ballandes.

Société de Béchade. Béchades.

Maison Barrau. Barraus.

Maison Gubbay. Dal Gubbay.

Compagnie des Etablissements Hagen. Hagen.

(b) Shipping Belonging to these Companies

St Andre and *St Michel*—Ballandes

Neo Hebridais and *Pervenche*—Béchade

Kobiloko—Hagen

Capitaine Olliveau—Barrau

Laperouse—*Messageries Maritimes*

[Regarding *Kobiloko*, Corbin de Mangoux thought this vessel which traded with Ambrym, Pentecost and other islands should be kept on the job.]

(c) Port Installations

The two most important places are Port Vila and Second Channel. Ringdove Bay on Epi could eventually become large port of call as there is relatively quick loading there, plus stores to provide storage for products.

At Surunda [Santo], at the anchorage of *Cie Agricole et Minière* only shelter for small boats of 800 to 900 tons is possible and reefs do not allow for manoeuvrability. Second Channel is the most vibrant port. Turtle Bay could be enlarged by removing reefs, but could only take ships up to 10,000 tons.

(d) European Population

In 1929, French was 797, [people] under French jurisdiction, 49. Total 846

English was 205, [people] under English jurisdiction, 53. Total 258

Total European population, 1104

(e) Importance of Cultivation and Yields

Statistics can be false. The best way is to estimate the yield is by hectares planted and quantities exported. This can be said to be the production figure. [Vibert and Audoin did not do this calculation with Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu.]

(f) Equipment

Cars are useless and troublesome—no roads—no garages—no mechanics—a foolish expense.

Comparison of six limited liability companies

Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles Hébrides. Capital 29,000,000 francs.

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise. Capital 15,000,000 francs.

Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté. Capital 10,000,000 francs.

Compagnie Cotonnière des Nouvelles-Hébrides. Capital 12,000,000 francs.

Société des Iles du Pacifique. Capital 6,000,000 francs.

Compagnie Coloniale des Iles Banks. Capital 2,500,000 francs.

Management is subject to two trends:

1. A tendency of financial managers who, wanting to manage the company's capital, try to reserve for managers all or part of the directional power.

2. A tendency of the working personnel-manager seeking to manage the production of produce, which demands his independence.

The first three companies, *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* are the most important companies and are under a regime of centralisation for the profit of the Board of Directors.⁴ Local Directors have restricted powers and effective direction is situated in Paris.

Compagnie Cotonnière des Nouvelles-Hébrides is under the centralised control but has a liaison committee.

Société des Iles du Pacifique has a Board of Directors in Noumea and all direction comes from there but it has no administrators as no one can spare the time. In Paris there is a Committee of Direction which takes no direct action in business management.

Compagnie Coloniale des Iles Banks has permitted local direction. Its effective direction is confined to *Cie Hagen* on Epi whose boat frequents the Banks Group and can manage the interests of *Cie de Banks* in the best way.

Compagnie Cotonnière des Nouvelles-Hébrides's Board of Directors works to a strict set of rules.

As for the three big companies, all authority is jealously concentrated in Paris, although *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* has given its Director some powers.

The manager of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* is a good planter and very keen on his job but works under crushing difficulties. Such a badly organised company needs the attention of a person exclusively in that job. He leads an exhausting life between Surunda and Malo, dealing with everything, visiting the sick, looking at plantations, and has no rest. There is no general management for *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* in the New Hebrides. The idea of direction from Paris with 2 months mail delivery time is not good.

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise has the same trouble with its Director in Santo having only limited powers. Its Director, a very different person from *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, is Leon Vibert who has no knowledge of agriculture and planting, nor the necessary qualities for tropical agriculture.

Local direction, not Paris direction, is what is needed for plantation management, nor can a director be in Noumea—five days away—nor on Efate but on Santo, centre of the most important group of companies and future economic centre of the Group.

The Director General or Chief Manager of the company in Santo should direct. Once the program is fixed, the budgets assigned, the initiative should be his—his hands free—and only have to render account with his balance sheets and six-monthly statistics and mail communication to allow Paris to follow his progress.

The Director General or Chief Manager in Santo needs an Administrative Director, technical personnel, and an Under-Director in charge of accounts with several assistants. There needs to be a consulting engineer in techniques of agronomy. This professional element is absolutely lacking in the New Hebrides and without it there can be no success. Orders are given by the Director General in Paris and the Chief Manager needs to be a planter, not preoccupied with book-keeping, and needs to employ labour to keep accounts and pay for things.⁵

Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* could be grouped together, the first two require amalgamation for proper management. These two companies on Santo, the number of their properties and a possible extension onto the plateau demand a common management.

(a) Personnel—local

This is difficult. Recruitment on the spot is bad because of competition for recruits amongst the different business houses which have interest there. Lack of numbers of recruits permits a young man to leave his employment, despite a good contract, to get a job with a neighbour. European personnel

are very difficult to get and can show lack of aptitude, physical and moral, faults of character, bad faith. But it is very necessary to get recruits from Europe.

(b) Personnel of companies

This is mostly a disaster and there is almost never an agriculturalist. Is Europe so destitute of men? *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* in 2 years has sent back 17 agents, some European, some local.⁶

Managers of *Société des Iles du Pacifique* and *Cie de Banks* are good.

Lack of staff, personnel, and the incompetence of the staff there has produced the disaster of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté*.⁷ No management or contract conditions have been set up. They are changed at will and new clauses introduced.

(c) Salaries of local company directors

Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*—53,000 francs and in 1929 also a bonus of 25,000 francs distributed over two years bringing his salary to 65,000 francs.

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise—93,600 francs [Leon Vibert].

Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté—84,000 francs.

Cie Cotonnière—72,000 francs

Duration of contract is a very difficult question. Currently there is a five year contract with leave in New Caledonia but a three year contract without leave would be a better idea.

The social life of staff is bad. For example the *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* local director is submerged in difficulties of personnel and disputes. This is not his fault but that of headquarters in Paris which imposes certain badly considered regulations which in turn has repercussions on work-in-hand and the budget. Directors of *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* should be abolished since agents are sufficient. The Chief Agent for *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* (not yet found) should receive 35 to 40,000 francs according to his value. Agents for Malo (*Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*) should be reduced to two; one for Barclay's and Balen's plantations, the other for Malo Pass and Prospect.

It is necessary to have a Chief Deputy Manager at Turtle Bay (*Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*).

Société des Iles du Pacifique is alright, only a good deputy Administrator is needed. *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* has had bad service from its European staff.

With *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, the Manager's house is in a ridiculous situation—on a little island like an old peoples' home.⁸ With bad egress to the sea the Manager loses at least two hours a day getting to and fro, and it is only 300 metres from the shore. The house should be turned into a hospital. The chief Agent should live at Point Sanif, the centre of the Turtle Bay property. However, 1,100,000 francs has been paid for a piece of land in the town [Vila] where a house has been repaired and rebuilt and the Director lives there far from cacao coffee and other agricultural contingencies.⁹

(d) Feeding Europeans

Is this the job of the company? If not why complicate contracts by food clauses paid or not paid. We advise that all ordinary food stuffs be supplied.

(e) General services of companies

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise like *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* has much duplication of accounts—all expenditure orders have to go Pairs, account books, statistical leaflets, drafts, summaries, all have to be duplicated for Paris headquarters which is not a suitable centre for information. With *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* the piles of information accumulate. The Director has little interest in *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and there is disagreement between the *Compagnie Générale's* accountant Rohr and Vibert, the local Director. At *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* the Manager, knowing very little about accounts, signs, endorses, and disengages himself from the responsibilities of the Chief Accountant.

The Chief Accountant for both *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* is the same person. He came from Paris in 1928 with full powers to represent the two Boards of Administration. Everything is done on the authority of the Director [Vibert] without the Accountant having the right of intervention as if the Deputy Administrators [in Paris] were looking for a clever way to elude their own responsibilities in jealously conserved authority. There is a direct communication between certain Administrators [Aupied] and lower staff [Vibert] which rouses great ire.

At this point in the report De Mangoux indicated the moral responsibility that the Heads in Paris carry for the disorder, anarchy, and final reduction of these two ventures, *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*.¹⁰

At *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* nobody knows what is going on at headquarters in Paris—nothing is questioned—one just waits. *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* business is well-run. The Chief Accountant has stopped sending certain documents to Paris. He is too busy.

With *Société des Iles du Pacifique*, fundamentally the administration is good, only essentials of information are sent off—all original copies, not copies of copies. Central accounting officers are in Noumea.

Compagnie Coloniale des Iles Banks is the same. Accounts are collected at Epi and controlled from Paris.¹¹

(f) Organisation of accounts department

Little by little great disorder is being modified. Centralisation in Paris of effective command makes necessary remittance in detail of all documentation to headquarters in Paris. The accounts department at Paris headquarters is supposed to collect and analyse all these documents. Thus accounting is done twice—colonial agriculture cannot support such duplication particularly *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*.¹²

The chief accountant common to both companies *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* arrived in the New Hebrides at the beginning of 1928. He prepared his complete system of accounting but the instructions of Paris headquarters multiplied the information to be furnished which was an enormous undertaking. *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* together work 10 properties all with separate complicated accounts. The result is that by October 1929 he had just finished the balance sheet for 31 December 1928 of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*. He could not finish those of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* for the same period until the beginning of 1930 with those of 1929 not even started.

At *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* things are alright. It has a very good accountant—we have a very good example here—very busy but much better than *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*.

Records are necessary for *Conseil* but only to be provided every six months. It is dangerous to consider the costs of plantation management as definitive and to maintain control of plantations from Paris.

(g) General health service

[Only *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* dealt with here.]

The wife of the Director, Mr Vibert, knows the hospital profession and is in charge with an assistant. Two Annamites also assist. Mme Vibert is appointed with a salary. But Santo needs medical organisation. Its lack is inadmissible and dangerous and open to criticism for all points of view.

(h) General services organisation

Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* should have a combined General Administration with its own Accountant, properly set up with the necessary staff. This would be more economical than the present set-up.

Summary

Results of business affairs should be available in Paris in an already condensed form, easy to read and integrate with general accounting. The Director-General and the *Conseil* should meet each year. The Director-General should bring himself up to date every two years in order to understand its workings. Every two years an Inspector should go to the New Hebrides to look at local difficulties at close range in order to understand them.

[Much of de Mangoux' report is omitted but de Mangoux considered that *Cie Cotonnière* was the best run and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* the worst.]

(a) Ownership of Plantations

No land belonging to any company has actually been registered at the Joint Court. Registration papers have almost all been deposited and await judgement but the greatest number of these registration papers are insufficient—needing a properly carried-out survey before being accepted. Consequently the companies are not officially the owners of their properties and no mortgage can legally be consented to.

The contracts of sale drawn up by *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* show that it reserves to itself the right and obligation of registration. This right and obligation in fact is illusory.

(b) General Inventory of Land

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise—area of virgin territory in hectares is 6983. Total value on our estimate is 1,483,900 francs. Possible utilisation and remarks: good land for cacao.

Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides—is the most valuable. In estimated value per hectare *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* is not as large as *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and is ranked third of all of them.

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise—total area of culture, coconuts, and cacao is 815 hectares with a remark. The new cleared land between the month of August and end of 1929 should have increased by 70 hectares if the program had been completed.¹³

(c) Cattle on Properties

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise has 910 livestock valued at 591,500 francs and does not need any more—the only one of the six properties in that category.

(d) Résumé of Value of the Properties

Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides—price of purchase 18,355,300 francs, estimated value 8,896,340 francs.

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise—price of purchase 11,212,146 francs, estimated value 4,776,805 francs.¹⁴

Compagnie Coloniale de Vati—price of purchase 6,630,000 francs, estimated value 2,141,000 francs.¹⁵

Société des Iles du Pacifique—price of purchase 3,192,144 francs, estimated value 4,583,820 francs.

Cotonnière and *Banks* not included in this summary. Only *Société des Iles du Pacifique* is valued at more than its purchase price. Mangoux wondered about the others.

[Much of the report is omitted].

(e) Industrial Installations—machinery for preparation of products.

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise has a new copra dryer, well constructed—not the best that could be done, but the best in the New Hebrides—a Gordon Dryer.

(f) Port Installations

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise—the wharf constructed by Mr Kerr, former owner of Turtle Bay, is not good enough and battered by high seas. On certain days loading is impossible.

(g) Inventory of Equipment

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise—a total value of 2,000,000 francs but the accounts to 30 June 1929 having been held up we are not able to make a suitable comparison.

(h) Cost of Indigenous Labour

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise—average 1928–29, 18,305 francs for real day's labour. [De Mangoux thought this very high and advised complete abandonment of Indigenous labour recruiting.]

(i) Annamite Labour and Indo-Chinese Labour

This forms 31% of total labour in the New Hebrides.

Cie Cotonnière and *Société des Iles du Pacifique* get their labour through Ballandes who have an office in Tonkin and a vessel to bring them and repatriate them.

Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté gets the labour itself and, in association with *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, supplies companies with the number required. De Mangoux thought that Ballandes should supply the lot.

(j) Recruitment

A coolie costs 4,500 francs for 5 years. That is 900 francs per annum

(k) Feeding Tonkinese Labour

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise labour costs less to feed than the other five companies however our work with this company is not precise enough or clear enough to draw general conclusions.

[Much information is omitted here]

As regards *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* De Mangoux is critical of local management—badly organised: coolies out of control—three of its centres are without liaison, without organisation—Malo island is isolated and local management [Vibert] lays the blame on the shoulders of the local director who is run off his feet. If the discipline regime is not modified, it will be necessary to abandon work in the New Hebrides.

(l) Land Reclamation

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise—in 1929 there were 128 hectares under production to cacao and coffee. 70 hectares more was supposed to be ready at the end of 1930. Unfortunately the work of this company is very variable. It has an excellent Manager but he lacks the long and meticulous experience necessary for success. Besides this the Director, Vibert, who himself has only a short experience with this sort of work has worked out his plan of extension without taking into account forest growth, and his Administrative Adviser [Aupied in Paris], who does not appear to have the least basic idea of these things, has never bothered himself with them [underlined in the original report] p. 119.

There are some serious mistakes of judgement. We have the impression of a company which wants at any price to raise its value, which the shareholders are not able to verify. At first view, costs seem less than *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*. From complex abstracts of accounts we have established that the making of a hectare—first clearing, fencing and planting—costs on an average 66.5 days at Turtle Bay and 92 at Mate Wulu. The difference is to be put down to the difference in quality of the agents (which proves moreover that the direct control of the Director [Vibert] is not complete).

[A big section is omitted here.]

(m) Crop Yields

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise

Kerr Bros (sellers) 1926, 850 tons copra, 1333 tons cacao.

Balance Sheet 1927–1928, 993 tons copra, 877 tons cacao.

Accounts 1928–1929, 993 tons copra and 779 tons cacao [under Vibert's management].

We have told Commandant Audoin that *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* needs 400 more coolies and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* needs 160 [report p. 145].

As for the two big companies *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, they are not at the present time in a financial situation to carry out the above suggestions [report p. 156].

(n) Conclusion, Projected grouping of the companies [report p. 168].

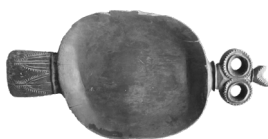
In the above conditions it appears to us that the shareholders of the six companies would experience the greatest difficulty in setting up a 'holding' company.

Three of the companies do not appear to have the least interest in a combined management and the three others are in the difficult situation of having an exhausted treasury. Their cost prices are exaggerated and their assets are considerably superior to those that could be resupplied.

It seems that *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté*, which have certain common links, should have a common management following the formula which we have indicated in this report but it is our opinion that the other companies for the time being continue their own separate managements.

Finally for all these enterprises, it is absolutely necessary that technical reorganisation completely alters the cost of their products.

We end this report with the last-named recommendation, for as long as these products cost more than they can be sold at, there is no safety, even with the help of a financial allowance, to restore their treasuries.¹⁶



Endnotes

- 1 It was not. France would not allow the Joint Court to adjudicate land claims from 1914–1927 because, from evidence in their own *Outre Mer* archives, it was known that many of these claims were doubtful.
- 2 Being a Condominium, it could not be either a French or British colony. A fact lost sight of in Paris.
- 3 What he does not say is that if a British subject is accused by a French one in a matter concerning land, as Defendant, his case must be heard before the Joint Court according to the rules of British law and likewise a French Defendant is judged according to French Law.
- 4 Charles Aupied was the Director-General in Paris.
- 5 See previous note. Charles Aupied was a stockbroker.
- 6 Leon Vibert was Charles Aupied's man on the spot in the New Hebrides. He got rid of H. Rohr, Fernand Largeau and Philippe de Vomécourt amongst others.
- 7 The Kerrs were not to blame for the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* mess. Vibert dismissed D.H. Kerr; W.T. Robertson (Robbie) refused to stay; also P. de Vomécourt. Aupied in Paris would in 1932 account for the mess at Turtle Bay by accusing the Kerrs of selling them short on trees although perfectly happy with the production figures based on these same trees.
- 8 The Kerrs had found the island much cooler and healthier than the mainland.
- 9 I wonder if this waterfront piece of land, which Audoin and Vibert held back when the Drug Store and house behind it was sold to *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté*, was the land in question?
- 10 This is exactly what Graham Kerr brought up in November 1932 when, as a Director of Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides, he attended its annual meeting in Paris—Aupied being Director-General.
- 11 Raoul-Duval—a permanent member of the Paris Board of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides* was Tiby Hagen's French agent.
- 12 This was done so that Aupied with the help of the Chief Accountant, his daughter's father-in-law, could cook the books.
- 13 Vibert did not carry this through.
- 14 The Kerr family's asking price was originally 15,000,000 francs but my father accepted a lesser one and took shares and Founder's shares (parts) for the rest. Also included in the price were valuable properties in central Vila—the Drug Store and the house behind it.
- 15 The Vila properties sold by my father to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* (Aupied) in 1927, were finally sold to *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté* for approximately 1,200,000 francs.
- 16 The above notes are a synopsis of the only sections of Part 1 of Corbin de Mangoux's report that concern me. (They were translated by Muriel Bogg and Katherine Cawsey ed.)

Appendix 4

Leon Vibert—Service Report

[Editor's comment¹: Appendix 4 is often unclear and this may be due to difficulties in transcription from the French or from unclear documentation by Vibert. I have not seen Vibert's original.]

New Hebrides 31 August 1932.

I arrived at Port Vila on 25 July. Accompanied by M. Déchery we went to the Accounts Department of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* where we found M. Rohr and M. Denis at work.

We immediately gave instructions for an inventory of all archives to be drawn up [and then] to proceed to pack them up immediately.

Cancellation of the service of M. Largeau as Director

We then went to Largeau's home. He received us with good grace and we at once proceeded to cancel his job as far as the plantation at Téouma and the rented premises in town were concerned.

At the cancellation of his job Largeau showed his habitual manner that is to say an appearance of friendliness hiding very evident bad will. After a cautious discussion and having acquired this conviction, I no longer laid stress on the matter, and terminated his contract to get out of trouble. I however did what was necessary to save his self-esteem, and I did it above all in the interests of our company.

I represented his departure to him as exclusively due to his state of health and that I had come just to welcome him. I consider having acted thus to have served your interests well, above all in front of foreigners.

Largeau sailed on Monday 1 August by *Laperouse*. He revealed, I am told, his astonishment and hurt at not being accompanied by a friend and at the emptiness surrounding him. The financial settlement of his affairs has been left in your hands. I contented myself by paying him 2,500F a month up to 31 July and, as he told me he had no money, I paid him the price of a ticket via Panama as well as 3000F in advance for his incidental expenses in order to warrant the expenditure. He had wanted a ticket via Sydney saying he needed to see his doctor but, not giving a good reason, I refused.

I also send you the report signed at the time of the cancellation of his job on the subject of the plantations which I demanded of him, to specify which areas had been abandoned on the Santo properties which Largeau refused to sign. I should add here in all truth, that M. Largeau has led here a campaign of calumny against *Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides* [Paris headquarters] unworthy of a plainly honest man and it will need time and much calmness to efface the very bad impression that this man has left here.

The considerable time spent making the inventories and packing them prevented us from setting out in the *Morinda*.

Personnel lay-offs

Between times, we have on his return put M. Jourdan *au courant* regarding the orders received from headquarters about laying-off M. Rohr and he gave us his frank opinion. He counselled us very strongly against the ruling of our Chief Accountant [which was] to rely on the grave-fault clause—especially with the short time remaining of his [Rohr's] contract. He said no court, and above all that at Port Vila, would allow it.

If you lose the case you risk having to pay damages. Taking in this advice which M. Jourdan said he would give me in writing and before he could let you know by telegraph, I decided to give M. Rohr a

six months notice of lay-off, but deposit retrospectively a sum of about 633 francs 60 centimes which he has paid to himself monthly since the fall in English currency.

On this matter see his contract, setting out precisely his salary.

[I omit the money permutations but think the sum Vibert decided was due to him was 30,791F.04 centimes (30,791.04F, editor)].

After our [Vibert's and Rohr's] verbal agreement, M. Déchery drew up at my dictation a receipt for the remainder of the full account and I paid Rohr his money. He verified it, pocketed it, buttoned his jacket and left with the receipt in his hand. Intrigued I followed him and saw him seat himself in his office, taking up his pen. After some hesitation he wrote at the bottom of the receipt: 'under reserve of all ... at this moment, I attach it [this receipt] and the sum of money given to me... I invoke as witnesses the persons present whom I have been careful to call: Déchery, Khe and Nham, and Vibert asked M Denis to call the bailiff'. Overcome by fear, Rohr restored the 30,791,04F (30,791.04F, editor) and left.

The same evening I [Vibert] was advised that a chest of documents had been removed and placed in the care of a servant at the home of Mme. Berut and the next day I received a phone call from M. Jourdan confirming the news.

We then met to decide on our next move. I followed the advice of M. Jourdan, and we reported to Governor Calotti [French Resident] who refused to intervene.

The policeman Lahax (sic), acting in the job of Public Prosecutor, showed himself to be less circumspect and agreed to follow us to Mme Berut's house, who on being questioned, confirmed that she had received from M. Rohr a chest to look after. M. Rohr called, stammered out an excuse and being pressed, ended by acknowledging that the chest contained accounting documents.

I told M. Lahax verbally at this time that I was lodging a complaint of which I gave him the text.

Rohr, told to open the chest and restore the documents, consented on the promise that complaint would be withdrawn which was done immediately after. M. Rohr was then paid according to the ruling of which I enclose a copy. I won't give all of it but he received a receipt for 12,992,60F (12,992.60F, editor).

At the end of the receipt signed H. Rohr was written: 'I formally renounce my return-fare to France also that of Mme. Rohr. Port Vila 5 August 1932'.

Being a bit disturbed, M. Rohr put in a complaint neither making the facts nor the persons accused clear when he had made his completely distorted accusations. In presenting it he said his settlement had been accepted under threat of a complaint even if this was already withdrawn.

Moreover no connection has been given to this fantasy (sic).

Today we are rid of Rohr and we have paid neither ...? nor passage.

The archives packed up, Largeau departed and the Rohr affair dealt with, M. Déchery was able to embark, 12 August midnight on the little boat *Lolita* belonging to M. Natural, taking his staff and his archives.

He arrived at Surunda on Monday 15 August and installed himself with M. Mahé at Théobroma to begin his work.

The transport of all these persons (two whites and three Annamites) as well as all the moving and all the office archives is detailed in the invoice enclosed.

Passage: Dechery and Denis Vila-Santo, 150F; three Annamites, 225F; luggage 306F:
total is 681F.

It was hardly possible to make the transport of the Accounts Bureau more economical.

I had to send M. Déchery alone in advance for I have to assure myself that the Rohr affair has been definitely dealt with and to discuss with the Rossi brothers the Anabroua affair on the subject of which I have succinctly explained in my telegram No.4 and which I ask you to sanction. The situation of the settlers is only made worse if the Rossis do not take up this affair, it is to be feared that we will have to take over administration and be very put out for lack of labour.

Having settled at Port Vila all the matters in progress, packed up the 'rewards' of July [the sacking of Rohr and taking away of Rohr's incriminating evidence against him] and made all my visits, I [Vibert] have organised a permanent real-estate business thus: (1) a typist who will receive the mail from the

packing cases and take the urgent steps necessary; (2) a person to guard the office and clean up the city property; and (3) provisionally two carpenters who will restore the shed near the coffee factory. (They will rejoin Santo when the work is complete).

This is all I could do. I should have wished before my departure to have leased the former Accounts Office and the Agents' houses (the former K.B. Store and house) but your cable 'For location see Jourdan' led me to suppose that you were *au courant* with the idea that he has of leasing the buildings of *Cie KPM* and for which we have given him freedom to act.

Unfortunately as well as telling you in the note of Courier No. 3 of the Estate Agency we greatly fear that this location cannot be had.

In this case perhaps we can make a case regarding the former office [to give it to] M. Rossi who wants to set up a bakery and to whom we offer as an offset the little mechanical kneading machine at Turtle Bay, rendered useless since the amalgamation.

We embarked at Port Vila on *Saint André* on Tuesday 16 August. We have thus made a tour of the Group in which we have seen all the minders of our properties who have not seen the [local] Director of SFNH since the departure for France of M. Vigoureux in 1926.

This visit was necessary. I have thereby gained knowledge of much of our properties and the people who are charged with looking after them. You will find in an adjoined memo, a report of certain of these visits to our caretakers?

I disembarked at the wharf at Surunda where Messrs Déchery, Pascal, Mahé, Denis, Coulon, and Perronnet met me and, after a brief cordial conversation with each of my collaborators, I betook myself to Théobroma where I have set up my office.

(a) Personnel

[Editor: It is difficult in the text to distinguish between '*A Group*', '*B Group*', and '*C Group*'; and First Group: Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu, and the Second and Third Groups: said to include Saraoutou, Surunda, Canal Malo, and Téouma.]

Personnel is manifestly more numerous than it has been and above all since Mr Pinelli's time. It comprises: *A Group*. Centres of Surunda [later referred to as the '*Second Group*']

(1) Principal Manager—M. Pascal: 3,000F

(2) Assistant Manager—M. Pierre Perronnet: 1,000F

(3) Mechanic—M. Michel: 1,800F

(4) Assistant Mechanic—M. Paul Perronnet: 1,000F

(5) Storekeeper—M. Coulon (to be replaced by a Radio Telegraphist paid out of the budget and to look after the Store at the start of the engagement): 1,300F

(6) Accountant—M. Mahé: 2,000F

(7) Assistant Accountant—M. Denis Poste (position to be abolished at the end of his contract): 1,250F

(8) Carpenter—M. Vaubrun (job to be abolished at end of contract): 1,400F

Savings to be realised: 4,950F

Thus doing away with three employees of whom we will replace one by a radio telegraphist who we plan to engage and one employee to set up as a Recruiter.

B Group. Malo Centre

The Manager of this centre M. Pommelet is an average manager but is violent and he drinks. He earns according to the contract given him by M. Renault, 3,000F per month (18,000F per annum) and food allowance of 6,000F. With a trip to Noumea once a year, during which he has the right to a month's rest, it is necessary to add to his 36,000F: passage 3,000F, 2 months' salary 6,000F, arriving at the sum of 45,000F. To which there is added 1 servant at 4,000F.

M Pommelet is thus an Agent who costs nearly 50,000F per annum. My idea is to replace him with a competent man who is a good worker which I could have for half the price.

Pommelet's contract ended on 15 June last and with 3 month's notice [of non-renewal.] M. Largeau should have told him on 15 March, which he did not do... We have thus entered into a bond for 2 years with Pommelet.

C Group. Canal Centre [Segond]

The Agents here number three:

- (1) Director—M. de Vomécourt who is to be replaced by a less expensive person: 5,000F
- (2) Manager: 1,400F
- (3) Assistant Manager—job to be done away with: 1,000F

Resulting from the accidental death of stockman Ali there is only one Manager, M. Pouillet, serious, competent and acceptable at the price. M. Largeau had already provided for a replacement for Ali in engaging his brother who is expected (despite your prohibition).

(b) Accounting Branch

Regarding an Agent to replace M. Rohr at Surunda, M Déchery has said—as I have told in another part of the discussions with the Chief Accountant of Ballandes—that M. Milliard is disposed to cede [a person] to us on condition we regard his return at the end of three years as our responsibility. Given the value of the candidate we ask you to accept this.

Neither Messrs Mahé nor Denis, although well-intentioned, gives us the desirable security. The contract of M. Denis besides would not be renewable. I would try to employ M. Mahé to allow one Accountant if that is possible and after the agreement of M. Déchery.

(c) Workshops

The workshops have an importance out of keeping with our business and are in each case a much too heavy financial burden.

There are at present in the *Mechanics Section*

- (1) Chief White Mechanic—M. Michel [Pascal?]
- (2) Assistant Paul Perronnet
- (3) 4 Annamite labourers

Carpentry Section

- (1) 1 white carpenter—M. Vaubrun
- (2) 4 Annamite labourers.

We hope to get rid of all the Annamites and the mechanic and when the Tonkinese village is finished close the Carpentry Workshop completely.

To sum up, we have at the present time two Agents too many according to our budget and at the figure which M. Pinelli had set for these staff. Conditions not having improved, there is no place to put them back on the budget but on the contrary to employ fewer if possible.

We have not managed to reduce the number to the strict minimum and even think of lowering the salaries of all Agents, those without contracts at least.

We have, besides, laid off two employees M. de Vomécourt and M. Toullec. For de Vomécourt this conforms to his contract, and from not renewing that of Segond which is being liquidated, following our reciprocal agreements.

Besides the obvious financial advantages in reducing personnel, one fact comes to the fore in that we do not have enough living quarters.

M. de Vaissière, M. Ancelin and then M. Pinelli have always lived in the Director's house at Théobroma. Now all the disposable dwellings at Surunda, besides being less numerous than formerly (two now in ruins), are crammed full.

I am compelled to share the Director's house with M. Déchery and the accountant Mahé. This constant, head-to-head situation is very awkward for me and presents grave inconvenience to the discretion necessary to my business affairs as my archival records are here.

So when M. Vénard arrives and I have the opportunity I will proceed with the necessary reductions. I beg you to bear it in mind that though the budget provided for staff reduction from the end of August is to be carried out before the end of September, I have to take account of the departure of boats and the essentials of service. On this point I ask you to take heed of these difficulties when I act differently.

(d) Labour

[This section of the report is dealt with very briefly (author).]

p. 8—M. Largeau had just ordered and we have taken delivery of some clothing for all our labour at 57F each. It is regrettable that we were not able to stop the order for in Sydney we found some much more practical clothing, with the advantage to the workers of only costing 27F, hat included. This would be a saving of 30,000F per annum.

p. 9—it is to be noted that there is an improvement in labour in the Second Group, above all in the centre of Surunda since Michel Pascal manages this property. But on his say-so there is much more to be done to improve the yield of the First Group.

The use of this labour, after careful observation of how it is distributed, calls for the following observations.

In general, the percentage of workers, in other than agriculture, is much too high, if for example we take as a basis the past month of July 1932 (the month of August, almost over, should provide an analogy), we see the following numbers of our work force not employed in agricultural work.

First Group—Turtle Bay and Mate Wulu—9.67%

The Second and Third Groups—Saraoutou, Surunda, Canal Malo, and Téouma total [with First Group] is 16.74 %.

In future you will see on our monthly statistical leaflet a drop in the percentage which we have attached to reduce to the normal figure of 12% of the total [sic]—the general duties at Surunda being always heavier.

The number of desertions in the First Group, which M. Largeau inferred, was not much lessened in spite of the last big return of time-expired men, was 9 desertions. It is still at the beginning of July, 9 men, and during the last month of my direction, 16 (sic) [desertions?] There are none in the Second Group managed by a former Manager, Michel Pascal of the First Group

p. 10—before the labour repatriation of September, the First Group had received the order to clear and plant 20 hectares in castor oil seed on the plain and on the land abandoned by the banana plantation at Sanif [Turtle Bay] going in the direction of Mate Wulu plantation. The area No 26, completely abandoned will be also replaced with coffee. In the part lacking shade, castor oil seed will be sown (about 5 hectares coffee and 5 hectares castor oil).

Finally 10 of the 130 hectares of the land abandoned to bush on the plateau by M. d Vomécourt will be resumed and planted with coffee before his departure with the labour which are due for repatriation in September. This for this year and all told we are going to undertake in the First Group a new area of 40 hectares.

(e) Maintenance

In the First Group cacao and coconuts (except for the coconut plantation of Turtle Bay on the contrary) are almost abandoned. Mate Wulu is flat like a tennis court and very pretty and open. We would prefer it a little less elegant and that the extensions of 1930 had not been abandoned.

(f) Crops

[Vibert makes a lot of the drought of the past years to explain lessening produce]

p. 11—he had sent a sack of ‘washed cacao’ to Maison Raoul-Duval for advice—a washing plant to be set up at Turtle Bay.

(g) Transport

[Not dealt with in detail here (author)].

p. 13—Vibert includes the Citroen [that Graham Kerr mentions being whizzed round the plantation with Vibert in 1932]. Vibert intended to get rid of much transport, two Fordson tractors and putting back the Decauville and Rouveyrolle [probably a sort of railway system] that Largeau had abandoned.

[Vibert also wanted to get rid of the Fordsons at the Canal, Malo and Port Vila as well as they guzzled benzene.]

(h) Conclusion

In the First Group M Pascal has applied the methods, carried out under my orders, for too short a time (3 months) at the former *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* but results are beginning to appear. The shortcomings still to be seen are the product of our Chief Manager [de Vomécourt] alone here

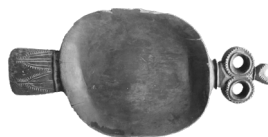
and without control he has not been able to continue (sic). I hope that my presence here will be able to soothe Pascal and I will be able to keep him where his collaboration would perhaps be very useful.

In the Second Group M. de Vomécourt made trouble when Pascal came to replace him putting it all down to his predecessor. This has caused some mistakes. The labour is far from doing its job and the use of labour is badly apportioned. The coconut plantation at Mate Wulu, levelled flat, has occupied a considerable number of labourers which de Vomécourt should have used to look after the extensions of 1930.

In the Third Group the labour in the proximity of Port Vila does not produce anything. It would be necessary to inspire the Manager with increased energy to put the property in repair.

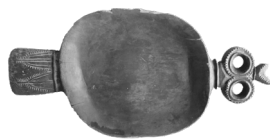
Altogether the very important economies could be realised with your aid. I have given you an accountand I am attached to carrying out my program.

Signed,
L Vibert



Endnotes

- 1 Editor's note: the electronic and printed versions of Katherine Cawsey's Appendix 4 were corrupted in the pre-edited version of Book 2. This would be a translation by Katherine Cawsey (and maybe also Muriel Bogg) from the French of Leon Vibert's Service Report for 1931–32 (probably to Aupied, Director of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco/Hébridaise*) and there may be a copy in the Katherine Cawsey's National Library of Australia Archive though the summary of her archive materials does not make this apparent. The translation from the French reads awkwardly and I have been unable to check details. Attempts at clarification by Katherine Cawsey or by the editor are in square brackets. It is likely that the original Vibert report was badly written.



Appendix 5

Ships Register

Numbers indicate the Chapters and Appendices where ships are mentioned.

Aldebaran (French Aviso), 2, 4, 6, 7

Andromede, 12

Antinous, 6, 12

Ballarat, 14

HMAS *Brisbane*, 6

Bucephale or *Bucéphale*, 16, 18

Capitaine Illiaquer, 18, 20

Capitaine Olliveau, Appendix 3

Cap Tarifa, 21

Céphée, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, Appendix 1

Commissaire Ramel, 9, 10, 16, 21

Comorin, 14

Countess of Ranfurly, 4

Dawn, 4

Delhi, 8

H.M.S. *Diomedé*, 9, 16

Drahn, 3

Dupleix, 7, 8, 9, 10

Eridan, 18, 20, 21

Esperance, 16

Esperance Bay, 8

Euphrosyne, 4, 5, 7, 8

Fitzroy, 3

Flying Fox, 4

Heliopolis, 15

Illyria, 10, 10

Jeanne d'Arc (new name for *Lunawanna*), 10, 15

Kersaint, only referred to in an endnote in Chapter 6

Kobiloko, 12, Appendix 3

Koné, 1

Laperouse, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, Appendix 3, Appendix 4

La Victoire, 5

Lolita, Appendix 4

Lunawanna, 3, 3 endnotes, 4, 5, 6, 6 endnotes, 7, 8, 9, 10, 10 endnotes, 15, 15 endnotes

Maetsuycker, 20

Makambo, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Makatea, 7

Marguerite, 6

Moeroki, 3

Moldavia, 14

Monara, 3

Mooltan, 6, 20

Morinda, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, Appendix 4

Naldera, 2

Neo Hebridais or Neo-Hébridais, 20, 21, Appendix 3

Notou, 6, 21

Olga, 9

Orama, 21

Ormonde, 13

Oronsay, 15

Pacifique, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 16

Pervenche, 4, Appendix 3

Pierre Loti, 18, 19, 20, 21

Pioneer, 2

Polynésien, 20, 21

HMS Renown, 2

Rosabel, 1

Sagittaire, 21

Skandia, 9, 10

Snark, 1

Southern Cross, 2

Speedwell, 3

St Andre or St André, 16, Appendix 3, Appendix 4

St Antoine, 1, 2

St Francois Xavier, 7

St Michel, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, Appendix 3

Strathnaver, 20

St Vincent de Paul, 6

Suva, 8

Sydney, 8

Tamarina, 1, 2

Tasman, 20,

Tathra, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 15, 20

Toa, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21

Van Rees, 18

Ville d'Amiens, 20, 21

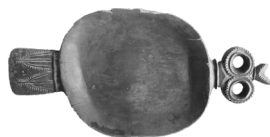
Ville de Strasbourg, 12, 18

Ville de Verdun, 12, 20

Verdun probably short for *Ville de Verdun*, 4

HMS *Wallaroo*, 16

White Heather, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7



Appendix 6

Name List

In the book some people's names are asterisked and as with the first *Kerr Brothers'* book these would have appeared in a biographical summary or 'Glossary of Names' as an appendix to the book. This was not prepared at the time Katherine Cawsey finished drafting her books. This list of proper names with some biographical references is provided for background. The names can be searched in digital versions of the book.

Adam, C. Gustave. Acting Joint Registrar, Joint Court, appointed British District Agent on Malekula on 1925
Adam, Mrs
Addyman, Mr, 'Kermadec' gardener c. 1939
Ali, a stockman at Canal Centre Segond
Audoin
Audouin, *Père* Alphonse 1880–1940
Aldington, Mr R.J.
Allard, M. Director to the Ministry for Colonies c. 1937
Alsopp, S.J.
Amery, L.C.M.S. (Leopold Charles, Maurice Stennett, Secretary of State Colonial Office (6 November 1924–4 June 1929), known as Leo Amery or L.S. Amery
Ancelin, Louis, local Director of *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* around 1931
Anderson, William, Presbyterian missionary and later planter at Undine Bay, then again a missionary
Anger family
Annamite labourers, Vietnamese, inhabitant of Annam
Arab(s)
Arihé, Japanese employee of Kerr Bros (sometimes spelt Ariké)
Arrighi, M.
Ashton, Captain Percy G. Son of Julian Ashton, artist
Ashton, Julian
Ashton, Mr and Mrs Julian
Asiatics, Australian Government white Australia policy (e.g. 1925)
Audouin, *Père* Alphonse 1880–1940
Audoin, Commandant Antoine, sometime representative of the *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* on Santo
Aupied, Charles, Director of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* and *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*
Austin family
Austin, Olga
Austin, M.L.
Australian Paper Company at Botany, maybe Australian Paper Mills Company
Ayton, William James (d. 15/3/1921)

Ayton, Mrs Alexina Jean (sixth child of Axel and Esther —Alexina) m. John Mawson Sarginson (d. 1914) then William Ayton
Ayton, Gretta (daughter of Mrs. William Ayton)
Axam, S.L.

Baldwin, Stanley, British Prime Minister, in office: 23 May 1923–16 January 1924, 4 November 1924–5 June 1929 and 7 June 1935–28 May 1937
Ball, Ray, Sydney Office Kerr Brothers Ltd.
Ballard, B.C. Counsel before the Joint Court after F.E. Wallace
Ballande, M. Andre
Ballande et Fils
Ballandes probably same as Ballande and Co. of Bordeaux and Noumea
Bank of Indo-China (BIC) usually in French
Banks Company or Oceanic Rubber Planting and Trading Co. Ltd. in the Banks Group on Vanua Lava, an Australian Company established circa 1911, to grow coconuts and rubber (probably also called Rubber Company)
Banque Bénard Frères
Banque de l'Indo-Chine (BIC)
Banque Française d'Afrique
Baratau, M., Secretary-General *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*
Barclay, Captain D.R. Sassuli Plantation, Malo Island
Barrau, Adolph
Barrau, M. Ernest
Baynes or Bayne
Beale, Mr
Béchade, G. de
Bell, Mr William Lockhart, also see W. Lockhart Bell, Assistant Collector of Customs
Bell, Doris, daughter of William Lockhart Bell
Bell, Joyce, daughter of William Lockhart Bell
Bell, Kathleen, daughter of William Lockhart Bell
Bell, Thelma, daughter of William Lockhart Bell
Berthault M., French Commandant of Constabulary
Berthelot, M., Head of the French Foreign Office 1926
Berut, Mme., Spelt Bernut in Vibert's report
Big Nambas, Malekula
Bladinières, of Mélé
Blandy, Richard Denis, British Resident Commissioner, 1940–50
Boisiven, M., expected to be French Resident in 1921
Bonneaud, Albert, Director of Ballande's Vila branch
Borgesius, Dr. Goeman, Doctor of Laws from Leyden University, Native Advocate, Acting Head of Joint Court
Bourdinat, *Maitre*, lawyer, Noumea
Bovins and Co. Swedish board making factory in England
Bowie, Reverend F.G.
Briand, Aristide, Prime Minister of France for the last time between 29 July and 2 November 1929
Bridgeman, W. British MP
Bromwich, John Edward, Australian tennis player (no 3 highest in world in 1938)
Bruce, Stanley Melbourne, Australian Prime Minister, 9 February 1923–22 October 1929
Brunet, Monsieur A., *Deputé, Ancien Sous-Secrétaire d'Etat*
Budge, Donald John, American tennis player (no. 1 in world in 1937)

Buhring, Fritz

Bulletin du Commerce, Noumea

Burns Philp and Company (BP and Co. or B.P.)

Caillard, Edmond, Director of *Compagnie Cotonnière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* at Norsup, Malekula
Caldwell, Mr J.T.

Calloti, M. Antoine Louis French Resident Commissioner 1931–33

Cameron

Campion, M. French Government representative on *Conseil of Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*

Cariou, Marc

Cariou, Mark

Carlo, from Paho

Casimir, Fernand Gaston Georges Émile Robert, French Resident Commissioner in the New Hebrides (1935-39)

Cassin, M. Santo

Catalan, M. Louis, *Catalan Frères*, Wine Merchants of Noumea and Montpellier France, President of *Société Kerr/My* c. 1936

Cavendish, Victor the 9th Duke of Devonshire, Secretary of State Colonial Office 24 October 1922-22 January 1924

Cayrol, Mme.

Cazaux, M. Inspector for Colonies

Champion, Captain Walter Hutton, Master Mariner, 1845-1925

Champmorin, M., General Manager *Messageries Maritimes*

Chantreux, H.J.

Chautemps, Camille, Prime Minister of France 21/2-2/3/1930; 26/11/1933-30/1/1934; 22/6/1937-13/3/1938

Chevillard, Ferdinand A.

China, Chinese labour

Christian, Nash

Choyer, Albert, manager of Ballande's Plantation, Santo

Churchill, Winston, Secretary of State Colonial Office

Cie Agricole et Minière or *Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CAMNH)

Clapcott, R.O.D., South Santo

Coates, J. G., Gordon Coates, Prime Minister of New Zealand, 30 May 1925-10 December 1928

Coates, Keith

Cochet, M. a manager at *Messageries Maritimes*

Cochin-China (French)

Colardeau, M.

Comité de Défense des Actionnaires of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*

Compagnie Agricole et Minière des Nouvelles-Hébrides (CAMNH)

Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides (CCNH)

Compagnie Coloniale des Iles Banks (CCIB)

Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté (CCV)

Compagnie Cotonnière des Nouvelles-Hébrides

Compagnie des Etablissements Hagen (CEH)

Compagnie Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides (CFNH) is CCNH although CCNH is used as far as possible

Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides (CFINH), French Real Estate Company of New Hebrides

Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise (CGFH)
Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides (CFNH)
Comptoir National d'Escompte (CNEP)
Conseil de Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise
 Condominium
 Condominium Government
 Coolies
 Cooper, Viola, American
 Corlette, Ewan A. Metevan plantation
 Coulon family
 Coulon, Raymond
 Coulon, Victor
 Coursin, Me. Joseph-Marc, father of Marcel
 Coursin, Me. Marcel
 Courts of First Instance (native tribunals)
 Crewe, Lord, British Ambassador to France c. 1926
 Crocker, George
 Cronstedt, Agnes, daughter of Axel Cronstedt
 Cronstedt, Alexina Jean, daughter of Axel Cronstedt
 Cronstedt, Axel (b. 5/4/1833, d. 26/7/1906)
 Cronstedt C. H. (Carl Harley, b. 1874, Aneityum)
 Cronstedt, Esther (b. circa 1850, m. 24/12/1872)
 Curzon, George Nathaniel, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in the UK 1919-24

Daladier, Édouard, French Minister for Colonies and Prime Minister of France on three occasions: 31/1-26/10/1933; 30/1-9/2/1934; and 10/4/1938-21/3/1940

Dale, Mme.
 d'Andino, Count, Public Prosecutor (see Andino)
 D'Arboussier, M. Henri, French Resident Commissioner (1921–1923 then again 1925–1929)
 Davies, Dr John Paton Memorial Hospital
 Davison Products
 Deacon, Arthur Bernard, anthropologist
 De Béchade (de Béchade's bulk store)
 Déchery, M. and Mme.
 Decoudre, M. Jean, French Deputy Commissioner for Santo
 Dedieu, Georges, and family
 De Gayon, Ernest, one time Government Agent (on Malekula)
 De Gayon, Miss
 Delcung-Saint-Martin, Jeanne, married Paulin Ratard
 Delcung-Saint-Martin, Raymond, and family
 de Leener, Jules, Registrar to the Joint Court, also Acting Public Prosecutor
 Deligny, Charles, Manager for Ballandes in Vila till he died in a fire in 1928
 de Mangoux, M. Corbin, made a study of the New Hebrides (1930) for the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine* and other financial establishments (Appendix 3)
 de Planque family or Deplanque family
 de Preville, Jaques (Jack)
 Denis, M.
 Deplanque, M.

de Salins, General Arthur and President of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, 1924 on
Descremet, M. Honorary Governor of Colonies (c. 1937)
Des Granges, G. Gomichon
Desmoulières, M. Vila Manager of *Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides*
de Sonnevile, Gaston
Des Pointes, Admiral (see Auguste Febvrier-Despointes)
de la Vaissière, M. Auguste Adolphe Joseph Marie Raoul, French Resident Commissioner 1923–25
de Vaissière, M.
De Vere, Robert Steven, British Judge to the Joint Court, took up post in May 1922
Devlin, Miss, long standing friend of Kerr family
De Vomécourt, Philippe, Director of the Canal Centre, Second
Dignam, Mrs
Dillensenger, Mlle. Cousin of the Mys
Discombe, Reece
Dodwell's Desiccated Coconut Factory at Negombo in Colombo
Douceré, Bishop
Douyère, Auguste
Douyere, Jules
Draghicewicz
Dubois, M.
Ducasse, M. notary in New Caledonia
Dunlop, T.D. British Consul to New Caledonia
Dupertuis, Charles-Bernard and daughter Cecilia
Duval, Raoul, of Le Havre, Agent for Colonial mercantile products also see Raoul-Duval, Edgar
du Val, Raoul (as above), permanent member of the Paris Board of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* and *Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides*

East Santo Plantations (ESP)

Eedy, Charles, Tanna
Edwards, Lucy (née Hutton)
Else, Lola daughter of Lou and Esther, b. June 1919
Else, Lou
Else, Esther (née Hutton)
Émaé, Mai, Mai, the spelling Emai is mostly used in the book
Empain, Comte John, likely the grandson of Édouard Louis Joseph Empain the Egyptologist who built a new town in Egypt called Heliopolis—which was the name John Empain's boat when visiting Santo
Erromango is sometimes spelt Erromanga for instance on Mission maps
Esperanza, titular head of the Joint Court, is the name mostly used in the text for Senor Don Tomas Alfonso y Zabala, Count/Comte de Buena Esperanza
Evans, Mr.
Exeter Hall, in The Strand London, was used for holding religious and philanthropic meetings

Facio, George

Farmers Department Store
Farquhar, Captain, Commander HMS *Diomede*
Febvrier-Despointes, Auguste (1796–1855) took possession of New Caledonia in the name of France on 24 September 1853
Fell, T.E., Acting High Commissioner Western Pacific High Commission

First World War
Fleming, F.J., daughter Betty
Fletcher, Sir Arthur, Western Pacific High Commissioner 22 November 1929-May 1936
Florens, Albert
Fox, Mr Everard
Fox, Mrs Everard, daughter Dorothy and son Leslie
Francis, Captain Clifford C. Sometime British Judge in the New Hebrides
Francois, Jean Marie
François-Marsal, Frederic, ex-French Premier
Frater, Reverend Maurice, Paama
Frater, Dr.
Freeman*, Captain Friedrich (Fred), children Ada, May and Henry (Freeman family)
French Governor-General of Indo-China
Freudenreich, Paul
Fricotte, Louis, boat builder
Frouin, Gabriel
Fysh, James Elkin, One time President of the New Hebrides British Association

Gané, Edouard-Philippe, daughter Gilberte
Gané, Henri
Gardel, Raymond, b. 1890
Gardel, Miss
Garran, Sir Robert, Australian Government Solicitor-General
Gartrell White Ltd, bread and cake manufacturers, Sydney
Gayon, Maurice, local agent of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* in 1931
George V King of England b. 3 June 1865-d. 20 January 1936. Reign 6 May 1910–20 January 1936
Germain, M.
Giraud, Commander
Giraud, Jules, S. Manager of *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides*
Giro, M. Henri, a Director *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*
Godden, Reverend C. Murdered 1905
Gold standard: was used as the basis for countries monetary system, Britain dropped the gold standard in 1931, USA partially dropped it in 1933
Gooding, Mr
Gordon Dryer for cacao
Gouin, M.
Governor-General of Australia
Graham, Captain Cosmo, HMS *Diomedé*
Griffiths, Brigadier-General T. Administrator of Nauru c. 1927
Grube, Wilhelm (Willy), Paama Island
Gruner, Elioth
Gubbay Brothers
Gubbay, Dal, Mr and Mrs
Guillemot, Henri, maybe also Harry
Guthmann, Mr, French party visiting Santo
Guyon, M. Joseph Marie Casimir, Governor of New Caledonia (16 March 1925-2 July 1932) and French High Commission to the New Hebrides

Hagen, Charles Nicolas, Tiby, also Hagen, Monsieur N.

Hagen Frères

Hagen, Les

Hamel, Professor of Law at the Sorbonne

Hanau, Marthe 1890-1935

Harbulot, Auguste 1902–1941

Harelle, Commander Nicolas (1875–1954)

Harrisson, Tom, Oxford Expedition ('Baker' Expedition), wrote *Savage Civilization*, New York, Knopf, 1937

Hawkesby, Joe, also Mr and Mrs, son Marmion

Heilman, M. Inspector-General of *Credit National*

Herriott, Dr and Mrs, Dr. Herriott took up the duties of Superintendent of the Paton Memorial Hospital on Iririki in August 1925

Herriot, Édouard Marie, Prime Minister of France, 15/6/1926-17/4/1925; 20/7-23/7/1926; 3/6-18/12/1932.

H.G.L. initials of an official in the Western Pacific High Commission

Higginson family

Hill, Mr Chris

Hill, George Sidney Treasurer to the British side of the Condominium Government 1935–1954

Hoarau, M.

Hoffmann, Mr. Richard (Dick)

Hog Harbour, Santo

Holmes, Consul, New Caledonia

Holmes' boat-yard at McMahons Point

Hoover Herbert, President of the United States of America from 4 March 1929 to 4 March 1933

Hotel Moderne

Houchard, Auguste

Houchard, Louis

Hubbard, P.C. British Judge

Hughes, W.M., William Morris (Billy), Prime Minister of Australia (1915-1923)

Hutson, Eyre, Acting High Commissioner for the Western Pacific 1915–1916 and again in 1919 then High Commissioner April 1925-November 1929

Hutton, Beatrice (Muriel's eldest sister)

Hutton, Clare (Muriel's youngest sister)

Hutton, Essie/Esther, married Lou Else on 20 May 1915

Hutton, Muriel (Graham Kerr's wife's unmarried name)

Hutton, Sydney Edward, Manager State Brickworks, Homebush (d. 8 September 1924 aged 60)

Imbault, M.

Imperial Conference

Im Thurn, Sir Everard, 7th High Commissioner of the Western Pacific (11 October 1904–1910)

Indo-China

Indo-Chinese labour

Inskip, Gordon

Island Trade Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, Sydney

Jacomb, Edward

Jacquier, Mme

Jameau, M. French banker

Japanese

Java
 Javanese labour
 Jeannin, M.
 Jeanson, M. G. French Judge Joint Court
 Jenolan Caves
 Jewish refugees
 Jocteur, Albert, also Mr and Mrs, had a place at Mélé
 Jocteur, Jules
 Jocteur, Marius
 John G. Paton Hospital (New Hebrides Mission), Iririki Island
 Johnson, Agnes Wilhelmina Watt Cronstedt married F.E. Johnson in 1911, daughters Dorothy born circa 1913 and Gladys born circa 1917
 Johnson, Frederick England (F.E.), sometime British Inspector of Labour, sometime acting-Commandant of British Constabulary and one-time employee of Kerr Brothers
 Johnson*, Martin wrote *Through the South Seas with Jack London* (1916) and *Cannibal-land: adventures with a camera in the New Hebrides*
 Johnson*, Osa, wife of Martin Johnson, wrote *I Married Adventure* (1940), *Bride in the Solomons* (1944)
 Johnston, Mrs Carl, sister-in-law of Willy Johnston, the British Consul
 Johnston, Catherine, née Kerr, sister of Graham Kerr
 Johnston, James (Turtle Bay)
 Johnston, Mrs Thomas
 Johnston, Thomas (Tom), British Vice-Consul in Noumea from 1922
 Johnston, Willy, the British Consul in Noumea
 Joint Regulation No. 4 of 1922
 Jore, Léonce Alphonse Noël Henri, Governor of New Caledonia, 20/7/1932–6/4/1933 and July 1938–7/8/1939
 Joseph, Gaston Adrien, *Directeur de Affaires Politiques, Ministère des Colonies*
 Jourdan, Louis, lawyer
 Joy, Sir George Andrew, Resident Commissioner of the New Hebrides 1927-1940
 Joyer, André, Director *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*
 Jullien, Messrs Th. and Ed. Marseilles agents

Kabota, a boat-builder

Kalsakau, Chief of Vila
 Keegan, Philip, and Thelma (third daughter of William Lockhart Bell)
 Kermadec, Osborne Park, Lane Cove, bought by G.L.S. Kerr from Billy Hughes in 1920. Muriel Kerr, seems to refer to the house as Osborne Park in the photograph album she made for Katherine
 Kerorio, Mme.
 Kerr, Agnes, sister of Graham Kerr (b. 6 February 1872)
 Kerr, Agnes MacDonald Stirling (Nancy), (b. 26/7/1928)
 Kerr Brothers and Company, also Kerr Bros
 Kerr Brothers House, K.B. House
 Kerr Brothers Store, K.B. Store
 Kerr, Catherine (b. 1879)
 Kerr, D.H., Donald Hugh (Uncle Hugh), younger brother of Graham Kerr (1879-1957)
 Kerr, Flora Jane, wife of James Walter Kerr Sr. (1841–12/06/1904), born Nova Scotia (sister of Captain Donald Macleod)
 Kerr, Flora Macleod, sister of Graham Kerr, married to J.M. Nicol (b. 1876)

Kerr, Graham (Kerr, Graham Lennox Stirling or Kerr G.L.S.) author's father
Kerr, Graham Lennox, son (b. 30/6/1922)
Kerr, Hannah (née Booth), children Walter and Bess, wife of James Walter Kerr Jr. (m. 19/10/1908)
Kerr, Isabel Mary (b. 22/9/1924–d. 19/4/25)
Kerr, Isabella Lennox (Bella) (1881-1921), Graham Kerr's youngest sister became Mrs Webb
Kerr, James Walter Jr. (Jim) (1865-1912), oldest brother of Graham Kerr
Kerr, James Walter Sr. (1842–1911), born Bridge of Allan, Stirling, Scotland
Kerr, Jane or Mrs Donald Hugh (D.H.) Kerr (Aunty Jane or Aunty Janie)
Kerr, Katherine Stirling (b. 8/10/1917)
Kerr, Joyce Lipscombe Macleod (b. 5/6/1913)
Kerr, Mary Isabella (Aunty Mary), sister of Graham Kerr (7/11/1870-1959)
Kerr, Muriel, Mrs G.L.S. Kerr author's mother
Kerr, Muriel Graham, author's sister (b. 28/4/1916)
Kerr, Walter Lister (son of James Walter (J.W.) Kerr eldest Kerr brother)
Kerr, William (1867–1923)
King, Merton, British Resident Commissioner 1907–10 July 1924
Klehm, Mme.
Kollen, Marcel married Anna Petersen
Krasker, Miss G.
Kuter, Robert

La Chaise, Fortuné 1854-1923

Lafarge, Me. René
Lafont, M., Member of the House of Deputies in France
Lainé M., *Délégué* at Santo, and Mme.
Lambert, Dr S.M., International Health Board of the Rockefeller Foundation
Lambreaux, H.
Lançon, Auguste
Langridge, A.K. British Member of Parliament and Hon. Secretary of the John Paton Presbyterian Mission Fund
Largeau, Fernand, sometime New Hebrides Director, SFNH, and sometime President of *Syndicat Français Agricole des Nouvelles-Hebrides*
Larney, Robert N.A. Court Surveyor
Lascars, sailors from India or South East Asia
Launay, M. Ballandes' Manager at Second Channel c. 1939
Lauppe, A.A., lived on Mai (d. 1908)
Laure, M. Noumea Director of *Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles-Hébrides* (CFNH) and Board of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* (CFINH)
Laval, Pierre, French Minister for Colonies c. 1932-35
Leconte, Jules, sometime President of *Syndicat Français Agricole des Nouvelles-Hebrides*
Leconte, Miss (Matilde), Jules Leconte's daughter, became Louis Ancelin's second wife
Leconte, Yves, nephew of Jules Leconte
Le Couteur, Wilson, Joint Court Interpreter until June 1921
Lederlin, Senator Paul representing Corsica
Leeman, Mr.
Leleu, Monsieur, Auditor *Société Kerr/My* very temporary
Lepeytre, M. Henri, Attorney of the *Banque Française d'Afrique*, also in 1933 *Chargé de Mission au Cabinet, Du Garde des Sceaux, Ministère de la Justice* in France
Lestel, M.
Leveque, Miss (Kerr Bros, Sydney)

Lippmann, Edmond, French Resident Commissioner of New Hebrides from 1916–1918
Lockhart Bell, William, Assistant Collector of Customs
Loisy, M. retired Inspector of Colonies
Lord Howe Island
Luc, M. Vice President, *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*

Mabille, M. M. French Judge to the Joint Court (permanent from August 1917) then, from late 1922, President of the Court of Appeal in Noumea

Macleod, Captain Donald

MacManamy, K.

Macmillan, Reverend Thomson, Clerk of the Synod for the New Hebrides Mission

MacRobertson's Steam Confectionary Works, Melbourne

Madelaine, Dr., Condominium Medical Officer

Mahaffy, Arthur William, sometime Assistant Western Pacific High Commissioner

Mahé, M.

Mai or Émaé Island (Kerr Bros store on island)

Maillard, M. Governor of Colonies c. 1937

Maison Barrau

Maison de Béchade

Maison Raoul-Duval see du Val (Duval) entries

Malaria

Malvanoua Island, Santo or Malvanua Island

Mansfield, J.W. New Hebrides Mission

Marchessou, Marcel Alix Jean, Governor of New Caledonia 6/12/1936–July 1938

Marshall, Jock or A.J., the Oxford Expedition, wrote *The Black Musketeers: the work and adventures of a scientist on a South Sea Island at war and in peace*, Heinemann, London, 1937

Mas, Jean

Mashman, Beatrice née Hutton (1886–1963)

Mashman, Sheila (daughter of Beatrice)

Massey, William Ferguson (Bill), Prime Minister of New Zealand 10 July 1912–10 May 1925

Mathis, M.

May Day Rally

Mayet, M.

Mazoyer family, son Bobby

McCoy, Captain

McCoy, M., Telephonist

McKenzie, Dr. E. Superintendent of the Paton Memorial Hospital on Iririki until 6 August 1925

McKenzie, K. Sometime Superintendent of Works

McLaren, G. Seventh Day Adventist Mission

Mélé, (French Plantation owned by Klehm family) on Efate, also the municipality of Mélé, or Faureville

Meralav, Silas, Hog Harbour

Meriau, M.

Merlin M. Inaugural President of *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*, late Governor-General of French Indo-China

Michel, M. mechanic

Michel, Pascal, also see Michel Pascal

Michelsen, John Oscar, also Michelsen, Oscar, Tongoa

Middleton, A.V., Radio Operator

Millar, George, Sydney Office of Kerr Brothers Ltd.

Milliard, M. H-L, Manager of Ballandes
Miramende, M. Jacques Louis, French Resident Commissioner of New Hebrides from 1913–1916,
then 1920–September 1921
Mitchell, John Leslie (Les)
Morin (maybe Captain Morin of Book 1)
Morrison & Sinclair Ltd. Shipyard
Mortensen, Mr
Munroe, Colin
Mura, Mme
My, Emile and Mme
My, Richard (son of Emile), d. 1925 in New Hebrides aged 22. Had earlier worked in Sydney for
Kerr Bros.
My, Frédéric, Emile My's son in Paris
My, Jean, son of Emile My in New Hebrides

Nangire, Kerr property near Erakor
Naturel, M. Georges, Valesdir Plantation, Diamond Bay, Epi, near Ringdove Bay
Neate, Miss
Neil, George Morrison , or called Morrison Neil, wife Annie and children Roy, Walter and René
Neilly, Ella Esther (1888–1973), née Cronstedt, divorced from Nielly, M. Lucien and changed
spelling of her name.
Nestlé, Nestlé Australia
Neveu, Marcel
New Hebrides British Association (NHBA)
Newington College, Sydney
New Hebrides Mission (NHM)
Newman, James Flood (J.F. Newman)
Newman, Oscar, fiancée (in 1936) Mlle. Savoie
Newman, Thora
Nichols, A.H.
Nicol, Flora Jane wife of Jimmy Nichol
Nicol, James Marshall (Jimmy), Condominium Government Agent on Tanna, married Flora Kerr,
daughter Rachel (Ray), son Jimmie.
Nicol, Jimmie son of Flora and Jimmy Nicol
Nicol, Rachel (Ray)
Nicholle, Commissioner, Public Prosecutor of the French Republic
Nicholson, Mr and Mrs
Nicolson, J.D.
Nielly, Mrs Ella Esther (1888–1973) daughter of Axel and Esther Cronstedt, married to Lucien
Nielly but divorced so she changed her name to Neilly.
Nielly, M. Lucien Huques Arthur, acting Native Advocate, French Resident Commissioner of New
Hebrides from 1918 to 1919, Chancellor of the French Residency.
Noel, Alfred
Nordvi, George, a Norwegian settler (d. circa 1916)
Norfolk Island
North Head Quarantine Station

Oceanic Rubber Planting and Trading Co. Ltd. in the Banks Group on Vanua Lava, an Australian
Company established circa 1911, to grow coconuts and rubber (Banks Company)
Ohlen, Emile

Ohlen, Heinrich
Ohlen, Henri possibly same as Heinrich
Ohlen, Hermann
Ohlen, Jeanne, daughter of Heinrich Ohlen married Ernest Reid
O'Reilly, Mr Hubert de Burgh the British Judge of the Joint Court from 1918, retired in 1920

Paama Island also spelt Pauma, island between Ambrym and Epi

Paama, Willie

Page, C.W.

Page, Earle Christmas Grafton, briefly Prime Minister of Australia from 7 April-26 April 1939,
Leader of the Country Party 5 April 1921-13 September 1939

Pascal, Captain

Pascal M. and Mme.

Pascal, Michel, sometimes referred to by the author as Pascal Michel but probably the same person
(ed.)

Parts de Fondateur (founder's shares)

Paul-Boncour, Joseph, Prime Minister of France 18/12/1932-31/1/1933

Pelicier, Marie Mark Georges, Governor of New Caledonia 20/10/1939-4/9/1940

Pentecost, Peter, Aoba

Perkins, Stevenson & Co, Solicitors

Perles, M. Banker

Perronnet, M.

Perronnet, Paul

Perronnet, Pierre

Perry, Captain

Persyn, Godefried W.J., barrister, Belgian, Native Advocate

Petersen, Annie

Petersen, Julius (Danish mariner) and daughters Anna and Sophie (d. 1925), son Holger or Holly

Petersen, Robert

Peyrolle, M. Louis

Phosphate Commission

Picanon, Edouard, sometime Governor of New Caledonia also on Board of *Compagnie Française
Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* (CFINH)

Pieremont, Henry (Harry) Samuel Steinbeck, Clerk of the Joint Court

Piéttri, François, French Minister for Colonial Affairs 1929-30 and 1933

Pig(s) (Kastom)

Pilling, H.G. Secretary to the Western Pacific High Commission

Pinelli, M.

Poincaré, Raymond, Prime Minister of France January 1912 until 1913, then 15/01/1922 to
08/06/1924 and again 15/01/1926 to 29/07/1929; French President, 1913-1920

Poleman, Tom, surname sometimes spelt Polman

Pommelet, M.

Poste, Denis

Pouillet, M.

Priday, H.E.L.

Prince of Wales (Prince Edward)

Protocol of 1914

Pujol family

Pujol, René

Purcell, Mr

Purdy, Frederick John who settled in Aoba in 1914, son George
Purdy, George married a Miss Carter on 30 September 1936.

Rabineau, First Officer, Pacifique, died of Spanish Flu in 1919

Radcliffe-Brown, Professor A., anthropologist

Ratard, Aubert (younger son of Paulin Ratard), wife Suzanne

Raoul-Duval brothers

Raoul-Duval, Edgar of *Maison Raoul-Duval*

Raoul-Duval et Cie of Le Havre

Ratard, Jean (older son of Paulin Ratard), first wife Gilberte née Gilberte Gané, daughter Genevieve.

Second wife Cecilia Dupertuis

Ratard, Paulin

Rason, Captain Ernest Goldfinch, Senior Officer Royal Navy Australia Station then British Resident

Commissioner in Vila 1902–07

Reid family could this be Ernie Reid's family?

Reid, Agnes, married Antoine Rossi

Reid, Ernest married Jeanne Ohlen

Reid, Ernest Henry (1911-1991) son for Ernest and Jeanne

Reid, Mme. Hotel Reid

Remering

Renault, Commandant

Repiquet, Jules Vincent, French Resident Commissioner in Vila 1911–13, Governor New

Caledonia 1914–23

Responsabilité Limitée, private limited liability (company)

Revel, Charles, French Inspector General of Colonies and Deputy Administrator of *Compagnie*

Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides, from 1924

Reynolds, Frank

Reynolds, Mark

Richardson, General Sir George Spafford, Administrator of Western Samoa 1923–28

Rimbert, M. F.J.

Rivers, Dr William H.R.* ed. *Essays on The Depopulation of Melanesia*, with a preface by Sir Everard

Im Thurn, 1922. Originally intended by the author to be included in a glossary of names.

Robertson, W.T. (William Torrie) called Robbie

Roche, Daisy (married E.G. Seagoe)

Roche, L.

Rodman, Sir C. This is likely to be Sir Cecil Rodwell.

Rodwell, Sir Cecil Hunter, Western Pacific High Commissioner October 1918–April 1925

sometimes written as Cecil Hunter-Rodwell.

Rohr, M. H.

Rolland, Georges

Rolland, Me.

Roosevelt, Franklin Delano, 32 President of the United States, 4 March 1933 to 12 April 1945

Ronovura, an Islander, implicated in the murder of R.O.D Clapcott in south Santo

Rose, Downs and Thompson Ltd, Hull

Rossi, M. Antoine

Rossiter, Mrs.

Rousselot, Me.

Royal Navy Australia Station (RNAS)

Roxburgh, Mr Hugh, Voambi, Epi, possibly had a coffee plantation at Malingi and banana
plantation, at Sakau, around 1891 was Director of the Australasian New Hebrides Company

Rubber Company
 Russ, Mlle. Maddy, Jean My's sister-in-law
 Russ, Mme.
 Russian Revolution

Sachon, M. G.

Sakau Island, near Hog Harbour Santo
 Salisbury, T.R.F. (T.R.) British Government Agent on Santo
 Salles, Albert, French Government Agent for Tanna
 Sarginson, Greta
 Sarginson, John Mawson (d. 1914)
 Sarraut, Albert-Pierre, Prime Minister of France 26/8-26/11/1933 and 24/1-4/6/1936
 Sautot, Henri Camille, French Resident Commissioner 19/3/1933-1935, 1939-1940
 Sauzade, M. A.
 Savoie family
 Schepler, Governor of Colonies c. 1937
 Schmidt, (probably) Ernst Otto (of de Béchade's)
 Schoen, Jean, an American woman
 Scott and Sons, a Sydney firm
 Scullin, James Henry, Prime Minister of Australia 22 October 1929-6 January 1932
 Seagoe, E.G. (Mr Seagoe), Acting Head of British Constabulary, Acting Assistant to British Resident Commissioner
 Seagoe, Geoffrey, son of E.G. Seagoe
 Seagoe, Marguerite (née Daisy Roche), son Geoffrey
 Seale, Mr
 Second Channel
 Seigfried Line
 Seneque Me. French Lawyer (Maître)
 S.H., initials on a comment on a Colonial Office document
 Shore, Sydney Church of England Grammar School (boys)
 Shurcliff, Sidney Nichols, *Jungle Islands: the "Illyria" in the South Seas*. N.Y. Putnam, 1930
 Siadous, Bernard Jacques, Victorin, Governor of New Caledonia 3/5/1933-3/12/1936
 Simpson, Colin, wrote *Islands of Men*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1955.
Syndicat Français Agricole et Commercial des Nouvelles-Hébrides
 Small's Chocolate Holdings, Sydney
 Smith-Rewse, Geoffrey Bingham Whistler, Resident Commissioner of the New Hebrides (also Smith Rewse in the book) 28 January 1924-1927
Société Anonyme, is a French term for a public limited company
Société de Béchade
Société Coopérative des Nouvelles-Hébridais (SCNH)
Société Financière et Coloniale
Société Française des Nouvelles-Hébrides (SFNH)
Société des Iles du Pacifique (SIP)
Société Kerr/My
Société Le Nickel (Rothschilds)
 Solari, M. Amongst other things, Acting French Resident Commissioner in Vila 1919-20
 Spanish Flu (1919)—pneumonic influenza
 Speiser*, Dr Felix, Swiss anthropologist, wrote *Two years with the natives in the Western Pacific*, 1913
 Spenlé, M.
 Stavisky, Serge Alexandre 1886-1934

Stedman-Henderson Sweets Ltd, Sydney
Stedman, James, invented 'minties'
Stephens, T.C., South Santo
Steinmetz, Acting Registrar Joint Court
Stuart, Robert Petersen, sometimes Robert Petersen-Stewart
Sunbeam car
Suparbo, a 'teacher'
Suzor, P. Consul-General for France in Sydney c. 1937.
Swan, R son of R.C. Swan of Swan and Co, Pitt Street
Syndicat Français Agricole

Tabu (noun) as a sacred activity

Taittinger, M. Pierre, President of the Colonial Commission in Paris
Tallantire, Mr (Burns Philp Vila Manager) and Mrs
Tangoa Island, off Espiritu Santo Island
Taplin, Mr.
Taponier, Jules, Director of *Compagnie Coloniale de Vaté*
Tardieu, Andre, French Prime Minister 2 November 1929-21 February 1930; 2 March 1930-13 December 1930; 20 February 1932-3 June 1932
Tarras, Mme, ran Hotel Moderne
Tessia, Dr
Theuil, M. Léon
Thevenin, Rene
Thomas, Alan, Condominium District Agent (in 1936)
Thomas brothers (Hog Harbour plantation)
Thomas, James Henry, temporary Secretary of State Colonial Office (22 January-3 November 1924)
Thomas, Theo, (T.O.) one of the Thomas brothers
Thompson, J.
Tongoa Island, south-east of Epi. Sometimes it is unclear whether a Kerr Bros store is on Tongoa and another on Tangoa Island in Book 2. Tongoa is most likely.
Tonkin, Tonkinese labour, Northern Vietnam Red River Delta Region
Toullec, M.
Tribunal Civil de Paris
Tribunal de Commerce
Tronchon, Georges, on Board of *Compagnie Française Immobilière des Nouvelles-Hebrides* (CFINH) maybe Trochon not Tronchon as both spellings were in the original.
Tronet, Maurice George, French Resident Commissioner, 1930-31
Turner, Mr. Very temporary worker at Turtle Bay
Turtle Bay Plantation, Santo, James Walter Kerr's property, then Kerr Bros Store with D.H. Kerr in charge and resident there. It was sold to *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise* (CGFH) in 1927.

Unilever

Ussher family
Ussher, Mr N.J. Planter and Trader, also Ussher, Neville James

Vaissière, M. de la sometime French Resident

Valette, Eduard Maurice brother to Maurice
Valette, Maurice, representative in France of G.L.S. Kerr

Vaskess, H. Secretary to the Western Pacific High Commissioner
Vaubrun, M.
Vautier, Louis, worked for Kerr Brothers Ltd in Sydney
Venables, Consul, New Caledonia
Vénard, M.
Ventrillon, George
Vereecken H. (once maybe Verucken)
Vibert, Leon, manager of Turtle Bay for *Compagnie Générale Franco-Hébridaise*
Vibert, Mme.
Vigoureux, M. Alfred E.L. *Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* Director in Noumea
von Cramm, Gottfried, German tennis player, famous imprisoned by Nazi Government
Vysuck Estate, Efate

Wala Island off Malekula

Wallace, Frank E. Solicitor
Watson, Robert (Bob)
Watson, William
Weatherall, Captain
Webb, Isabella (Bella) née Kerr (1881 – 11/2/2021)
Webb, Jack husband of Isabella Kerr (d. 15/1/2021)
Webb, Zacharias, possibly the real name of Jack Webb and possibly married to Mrs Zacharias Webb Brisbane.
Wellerman
Wells, Mathew George (Matt), Santo property Ramona (Ramone), and plantation on Malo
Wells, Samuel Ezekiel of Santo property Ramona (Ramone)
Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC)
White Australia Policy
White Signet Ltd, sweets, Sydney and Canberra
Whitford, Mr Frank, Pakea Island (Banks Group)
World War 1
World War 2
Wright, Leon
Wright, Thomas (Tom)

Young, A.K.

Zeitler, Adolph ('Dolph')

Zeitler, Elizabeth (Lizzie), Lizzie Facio

This book is the second in the trilogy *The Kerr Brothers in New Hebrides* written by Katherine Stirling Kerr Cawsey and begins in 1919 when the Kerr Brothers—a company run by Katherine’s father, his sisters and his brother—have successfully developed their uncle’s (Captain Macleod’s) trading business and become plantation, store and ship owners trading throughout and beyond the New Hebrides Islands.

As with the first book, the second interweaves Katherine’s father’s diaries with the history of colonial settlement, the role of missionaries, and the effect of the inequities of French British Condominium rule and joint government on settlers and Islanders. But the sharpest focus is now on the predicament of British settlers in the New Hebrides in the face of far less rigorous Indigenous and foreign labour conditions for French settlers and an easier trading environment for these settlers to sell their produce overseas. In this book the competition for land and resources seems to be solely between settler groups; the claims of Indigenous New Hebrideans are largely hidden from the story.

The diaries and Katherine’s painstaking research in French archives enable readers to study at first hand the fate of the Kerr Brothers as they become enmeshed in selling British settler lands to French companies such as *Société Française des Nouvelle-Hébrides*: companies which have a close and sinister connection to the corrupt and nepotistic French government of the 1930s. Here too is a detailed portrait of a man, Graham Kerr, whose good qualities, weaknesses and naive ambitions lead him to think he can play French politics with only a rudimentary understanding of French society, language and character. In counterpoint are portraits, sometimes in their own words, of two ruthless French individuals whose aim is to destroy all of Kerr Brothers’ business interests for revenge and their own amusement.

When Book 2 ends, the Kerrs have excellent connections with most people in New Hebridean society, French, British and Indigenous, and there is room for optimism about the future of their business beyond 1939. What the future brings will be the subject of the third and final book of the trilogy.

